

Hikaru no Ramen

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What if Hikaru'd had a computer at home? What if he had never played Touya? What if he had never become pro? What if he had become a ramen chef instead? This is what Hikaru's life might have been like... 12/20/09:
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Go Dictionary

Go dictionary

Internet Go

Kyu, 2k

Depending on the Go-server, amateur ranks start at 20-30 kyu. 20-kyu (or 20k) is supposed to need one handicap stone less than 21-kyu, 21-kyu one handicap stone less than 22-kyu, etc. Countdown goes down to 1k.

Dan, 5d

After 1-kyu follows 1-dan (or 1d). The Dan-ranks also are one handicap stone apart. Again, depending on the Go-server, the highest amateur dan is somewhere between 7d and 10d (most have 9d as highest rank, just like the professionals, with 10d as special title won in a tournament).

Dan, 4p

Rating for professionals, which is not determined by the Go-server. To distinguish them from amateur dans, their dan-rank is followed by a 'p' instead of a 'd'. They are outside the Go-server rating system. Professional ranks are only about half a handicap stone apart.

Individual player ranks

Depending on the Go-server, ranks of a player can vary quite a lot. The same player can be a 12k on one server, an 8k on the next, and a 14k on another. This is because of the different player pools and an inflation tendency caused by the mathematical model to calculate ranks (look up Elo rating system in Wikipedia).

Unrated / unranked players

If a player either hasn't played enough games (mostly 4 or less) or has shown a great disparity of strength (winning against 2k but losing against 10k), most Go-servers will display the player as unranked with a suggestion of the rank (e. g. 5k?). This rank is only a suggestion, but the probability of it being right isn't very high. Most experienced net-players don't really like playing against unranked players because most of the time, they turn out to be absolute newbies who don't know what they are doing.

Go in general:

The seven greatest Japanese **Professional Go titles** with the prize money:

Kisei

\$355,000

Meijin

\$330,000

Honinbou

\$280,000

Juudan

\$126,000

Tengen

\$122,000

Ouza

\$118,000

Gosei

\$67,000

With the new rules established in 2004, winning Kisei, Meijin, or Hon'inbou automatically elevates a pro to 9-dan, no matter their former rank. Winning Juudan, Ouza, Tengen, or Gosei gives them 8-dan, and if they manage to defend the title the next year, they become 9-dan.

If a pro has won a title, said title is added to their name as suffix. If they hold several titles, only the highest is added.

Byou-yomi - time a player has to make a move after the original thinking time has run out

Handicap stone - stones black is allowed to place at the beginning of the game. Used to have players of different strength play on equal ground. One stone is the equivalent of about 10 moku

goban - Go board

goke - bowls where Go stones are kept

Ko-fight - situation of capture and re-capture that could go on endlessly. Go rules say that a player can't immediately recapture but has to wait a turn

Ko-threat - situation where the opponent *has* to react in fear of losing a lot of territory. Used in Ko-fights to keep the opponent from capitalizing on a captured stone until one is allowed once again to recapture.

Komi - points White gets to make up for Black moving first. Nowadays 6.5 moku.

Moku - territory points. They are the empty spaces completely surrounded by a player's color

shidou go - teaching games. The teacher doesn't play to crush, but to point out mistakes and challenge the student

tsumego - life or death problems, used to practice reading a situation very quickly

Chapter 2

Summary: What if Hikaru'd had a computer at home? What if he had never played Touya? What if he had never become pro? What if he had become a ramen chef instead?

Disclaimer: I don't own Hikaru no Ramen. The idea of Hikaru as a ramen chef I stole from Luce Red. The rest (whatever remains of this story when you take out Hikaru and Ramen) should be mine - if I haven't forgotten anyone else I have... borrowed ideas from.

Beta : Amarthame. Praise her and bow to her because without her, this story wouldn't have been possible. It would be lacking plot coherency and have even worse grammar than it already has. Many thanks to her for putting up with my... let's say, unique way of using English, and many thanks for helping me improve on my language.

A/N : The idea of HnR came while I was reading Luce Red's 'Next to NetGo'. There, Hikaru was more or less seriously thinking of becoming a ramen chef. I followed the idea to its conclusion - what if he really did become a ramen chef? Only later on, I noticed that Luce Red's already explored that possibility, too, in 'Just Add Water', but I think my version's different enough that it's not a case of plagiarism. Just enjoy this story, and have a look at Luce Red's stories because all of them are awesome.

Hikaru no Ramen

Chapter 1

"One Miso Ramen with pork and a tea egg, one Shouyu Ramen with beef and broccoli, and one Go Special Shouyu coming up. Anything else?" Shindou Hikaru looked up from the notepad he had scrawled the order on.

"No, thank you."

Twenty-five-year-old Hikaru smiled at the father who had been tasked with ordering for his whole family. Leaning against the counter of his ramen restaurant, Hikaru watched their interactions.

The man, not much older than Hikaru, looked quite harried as his energetic four- or five-year-old son was tugging on his pants and demanding attention. His wife, in command of a currently unoccupied pushchair, had already sat down at one of the four plastic tables, clearly exhausted. The rest of the small noodle restaurant was almost empty, only two other middle-aged men sitting at the counter.

Seeing that the man didn't look any less exhausted than his wife, Hikaru didn't bother him with any small-talk. Instead, he grabbed three sheets of printed paper and a pen from where he had stashed them away behind his counter. "I assume the Go Special is for the young man here?"

The father nodded. "Yes. He turned five just recently and only barely knows the rules."

Hearing the implied question, Hikaru had to laugh as he handed over both papers and pen to the concerned father. "Don't worry, those are some very easy life or death problems. After all, I want my customers to have a real chance. If he solves five out of those nine problems correctly before you leave, he'll get the ice-cream. And since he's so young, you get to help him with reading the instructions and writing down the solution. But if there's anything else or he has trouble understanding the rules, he'll have to come to me. No help from either you or your wife. And I'll be watching you!"

Hikaru smiled to show his threat wasn't serious, and the father had to laugh with him. "That's alright. He's got to earn his ice-cream himself, right, Matsuhiko?"

The boy looked up from where he was occupied with tugging at his father's clothes, crowing enthusiastically. "Yeah! Daddy, Daddy, sho'me the p'oblems!"

Both Hikaru and the father chuckled at that response.

"Well then, good luck, young man."

With those words, Hikaru watched father and son join the third member of their small family, the son already anxiously leafing through the go problems. Then Hikaru turned around to get three helpings of fresh, uncooked ramen out of the industrial-sized fridge at the back of the cooking area.

Every second day, before he opened his Ramen restaurant, he made a fresh batch of dough and formed the noodles. He didn't dry them, so he had to keep them cooled as to not let the dough spoil in the heat. Contrary to instant ramen, his noodles were still soft when he threw them into the boiling water, ensuring a much shorter cooking time.

It gave him just enough time to heat the different toppings before he had to take out the noodles. Pouring the requested broth into three bowls, he added the noodles that were barely dripping water anymore and decorated everything with the toppings. The Go Special got an additional piece of nori where he had painstakingly recreated a small life-and-death problem through dollops of white and blue food color. The grid-lines had to be imagined, but since it only was a small corner problem that wasn't too hard.

Serving ramen was very quick. All time-consuming preparations could be done in the morning, like making the noodles, cooking the toppings, or mixing the different stocks. The only thing customers had to wait for was the boiling noodles and the toppings when he gave them their final touch.

Placing the bowls on the counter he saw that none of the family was paying attention. The child was completely immersed in his Go

problems, and both parents were indulgently watching their offspring.

This had been one of his intentions when he had designed his Go Special. It was to keep youngsters busy while they waited for their food. The other intention was to get them interested in Go. As most children only did things for immediate rewards, he gave them a few problems of their skill-level, and the incentive of ice-cream if they solved more than half of them correctly. Of course, sometimes he also had to take effort into account when the solutions weren't quite right, but most of the time the children actually got their ice-cream on their own.

But it wasn't only children who demanded the Go Special. He'd had teens, adults, and even some inseis and pros come in and demand the chance to win some ice-cream after their ramen. That was why he had tsumego of so many different skill levels lying around, from absolute beginner to professional dan-level. He still remembered the time when Umekawa 5-dan, still an arrogant 2-dan back then, had come in and bragged that, for a professional like him, it would be child's play to get the ice-cream. The face he'd drawn after Hikaru had handed him his problems had been priceless, especially when the little girl who had been in line just behind him had had little trouble solving hers.

Since it was a slow evening with only two other customers contently eating their ramen at the counter, he didn't call out the family's order but left his usual spot behind the pots of boiling broth and water to bring them their food himself.

"Here you go," he said while handing over the bowls. "One miso ramen, one shouyu ramen, and one Go Special Shouyu. Enjoy."

He was rewarded at first with a surprised look, and then a grateful smile from the adults. "Thank you very much! It smells delicious."

Hikaru bowed briefly. "I hope the taste is to your liking, too. How's it going with the tsumego?"

"He's almost finished with the second sheet. They're just the right level for him. They're hard, but not so hard that he gets frustrated," the mother smiled, taking up her chopsticks.

"Ah. That's good then. And from the looks of it, I think I might have to get some ice-cream ready. Well, I'll leave you to your food. Enjoy your meal."

Fifteen minutes later, Hikaru indeed had to hand over the popsicle, which the youngster devoured enthusiastically, talking all the while about how he'd solved those really hard problems.

Hikaru was still smiling a long time after the young family had left to go their own ways in the humid Tokyo air. It was always nice to see such young children be so enthusiastic about Go - even if they had to be bribed with ice-cream.

This was the main reason he had created Igo Ramen. He had wanted to combine his two main passions in life, ramen and Go, and he privately thought he had done a splendid job of it.

His restaurant was located less than half a block from the Japanese Go Association; there were always several issues of Go Weekly around for guests to read; and he always offered a Go Special to keep his younger guests (and sometimes older ones, too) entertained. For those completely obsessed, he even had a small magnetic board where entire games could be played or recreated.

More than once, he'd had higher dan-players come over during the lunch break of their matches and, depending on their mood, sometimes even talked to them. He admired them for being able to take the step he hadn't been capable of. On the other hand, he also pitied them because besides eating, breathing, and dreaming Go, there rarely was place for anything else in their lives. Few things survived the dedication, the focus, and especially the endurance necessary to be a professional player. Most of them were a lonely bunch, awkward in surroundings that weren't related to Go. In some of them, even the joy of the game had been stamped out by the

need to play a certain amount of games a month to earn enough money.

This, Hikaru supposed, was one of the reason why he hadn't turned professional. He wanted Go to be just Go, not a bitter struggle for money or fame or other things not related to Go. Although lately, more and more people on NetGo had asked him whether he was a pro. And when he had said that he hadn't even been an insei, they had tried to convince him to take the exam.

He supposed that he was good enough to play some lower dans to a stalemate, but he'd never become a pro. No thanks. That level of Go-fanaticism included just too many issues he didn't want to deal with. He had always known that he wasn't like Sai, who had been virtually unable to care about anything else than chasing after the Hand of God.

Sai had also tried to encourage Hikaru to become a pro, and he had been very disappointed when Hikaru had refused. The ghost had lamented that he'd never get to play such good opponents anywhere else. But in the end, Hikaru thought, Sai had understood that Hikaru's love for the game had merely taken him down a different path. And that, Hikaru assumed, had been when Sai had left after close to seven years together.

It would be almost a sacrilege to suddenly change his mind now. His decision of becoming a ramen cook had ultimately caused Sai to vanish, and if he decided to go back on that decision it would feel like a betrayal of Sai's sacrifice.

With a slightly mournful smile he remembered their first day more than thirteen years ago.

Moaning quietly, the eleven year old boy opened his eyes. When the first thing he saw was the stark whiteness of a hospital room and the upper half of a strangely dressed man sticking out of his bed, he almost fainted again. The guy was virtually standing *in* Hikaru's bed,

less than half a meter from Hikaru's nose. He realized he must have made some sort of noise because the man focused on him, smiling brightly.

"Oh, good morning! It is great to see you have finally woken! I am terribly sorry for causing you such distress yesterday. I don't think I have introduced myself yet. My name is Fujiwara no Sai. I am so glad to have met you; I have been confined to that goban for such a long time."

All Hikaru could do was gape at the guy who, according to his own words, had to be some sort of ghost or other spiritual entity. The creature - judging by his kimono style it had to be a man - gesticulated emphatically with his hands, sometimes accidentally waving his arms *through* the foot of Hikaru's bed. Seeing as the man apparently wasn't completely solid, Hikaru was inclined to believe him, that he had been stuck in a goban of all things. Whatever a goban was. How else could he explain this upper half of a man standing *in* his bed? At least with the ability to walk through objects, there was a good chance that the ghost actually was a whole human and not the grisly remains of someone cut in half. But first things first...

"WHAT!?! You're a ghost?!?" Hikaru yelled at the man. "Ghosts are real?!? What are you doing here?!? Are you here to possess me?!? And who the hell are you anyways?!?"

With every shouted expletive the ghost flinched backwards, raising his hands to ward off Hikaru's volume.

Another almost immediate reaction to Hikaru's volume was the door flying open and an angry nurse hurrying in.

"What's the matter here? Why are you shouting?" She asked, her face pinched and fatigued.

Caught like a deer in headlights, Hikaru looked from the nurse to the ghost and back again. The nurse didn't seem so see the ghostly

torso sticking out of his bed. Nor did she seem to hear the ghost's wide sleeves rustle as he wildly flapped his arms in a comical attempt to signal something to Hikaru.

He frowned slightly at the ghost, silently trying to ask the ghost what he meant. The ghost's gestures turned even wilder, and finally, Hikaru got that the ghost was trying to tell him to remain quiet.

Hikaru didn't quite understand why the ghost didn't just say so because, judging by the nurse's impatient and slightly disgruntled demeanor, she couldn't hear or see the ghost. Actually, why was the ghost so adamant about Hikaru staying quiet? Was that an evil ghost come to haunt him? Should he say something to the nurse?

On the other hand, they probably would keep him in the hospital, and he wanted to have his mangas and his computer games, and he wanted to run around and play soccer. And the ghost didn't seem malicious or dangerous, so it was probably safe ignoring him.

With those goals in mind, he decided that it was not a good idea to talk about ghosts only he seemed to be able to see.

"N-nightmare," he stuttered, "I had a nightmare"

"Ah." She didn't look very convinced. After reading the chart at the foot of his bed, she looked up at him sharply. "Do you know where you are?"

"H-hospital."

"Do you know who you are?"

"Shindou Hikaru."

"Do you know why you are here?"

"I think - I think I fainted yesterday. But I'm not sure..." He trailed off.

The nurse nodded sharply. "That's right. You fainted and your grandfather called an ambulance. But we did several tests and according to them you are perfectly fine. Your mother currently is somewhere around the hospital; she should be back soon. I'll get the doctor to check on you, and if he gives his okay you'll be out of here by noon."

She briskly nodded to him, turned around and hurried out of the room again, closing the door behind her. Hikaru and the ghost stared at each other, completely overwhelmed by her unfriendly abruptness. Finally, Hikaru found his voice again.

"So... You're why I fainted yesterday?" The ghost nodded sadly, but before he could apologize again, Hikaru continued. "And 'cause I'm the only one who can see you, does that mean I'm stuck with you?"

"I'm afraid so, yes." The ghost started apologizing profusely once again, his vocabulary very elaborate and considerably out of date.

Hikaru didn't know whether he should laugh or cry. Yesterday, he had tried to solve his money problems in his grandfather's shed, and what did he get? A useless old ghost talking like people out of some of the stories they had to read in school. No thanks. And he still didn't have any money for the arcade and that new computer game.

Finally, he had enough of the ghost's lamenting. "Oh, stop it. Rather tell me how I can get rid of you. I don't need everyone to think I'm crazy."

This started another session of waterworks. Honestly, what kind of ghost was that? Hikaru had read stories about people not able to move on because they still had things left to do on earth. And he had also read about poltergeists, malicious spirits, and demons trying to devour helpless children. But a ghost that tortured its environment with extreme mood swings?

At least Hikaru couldn't imagine someone as emotional and teary as that guy having any bad intentions.

Hikaru sighed. Well, maybe he should try and figure out more about that ghost; perhaps that revealed a way of how to get rid of him.

"Calm down. You told me that you came to me because I'm apparently the only one who could see those blood-stains. What's up with those anyway? Are they yours? And who are you anyways?"

The ghost turned out to be a Go tutor for some emperor during the Heian era, which apparently was where his strange clothing came from. After some sob-story of being cheated out of victory and then drowning himself, which was immensely stupid in Hikaru's opinion, the ghost of Fujiwara no Sai had gotten himself stuck in a goban of all things. And then he had started possessing random Go-obsessed people, with the latest, some Hon'inbou guy, being the owner of those bloodstains.

Hikaru barely suppressed a groan. If he had gotten a hundred yen for every time the ghost had mentioned Go or anything related to Go, all his money problems would have been solved for the next few weeks. "Let me guess. You refused to move on because you want to keep playing Go?"

Sai nodded enthusiastically, and Hikaru had to wonder how the tall hat stayed on his head. "Yes, yes, I still need to reach the Hand of God! Please Hikaru, can we play a game of Go?"

Urgh, that was just great. "No way! That's a game only for old men and geeks!" Not only did he have a Go-obsessed grandfather, but now a Go-obsessed ghost was living in his mind. "And anyway, we have to get out of here first," he added as an afterthought.

"But then we play, Hikaru?"

"No!" The ghost's puppy eyes were a sight to see, but Hikaru adamantly refused to give in. "How do you know my name anyway? I don't think I've introduced myself."

Sai looked puzzled for a moment, then his frown cleared. "Ah, you told your name to that strange lady. And I share your mind, after all. I

can't see any of your thoughts, but if you think something at me, I should be able to hear it. At least it always worked that way in the past."

Hikaru concentrated as much as he could. *L-I-K-E T-H-I-S?*

Sai jumped backwards with his arms wheeling frantically for balance, revealing that he indeed was whole now that he wasn't stuck halfway in Hikaru's bed. "Aaah, not so loud! I can hear you just fine!"

This better?

Sai nodded enthusiastically. "Much better."

Well, that's good. Don't want anybody think I'm insane, talking to empty air like that. Hikaru found that thought-speech wasn't any more difficult than regular talking. He just had to think of talking to Sai and then remember not to move his lips. That would be the greatest problem, he surmised.

Suddenly, the door opened and a doctor entered, closely followed by Hikaru's mother. When she saw that Hikaru was awake and sitting in his bed, she hurried to his side and hugged him.

"Oh, Hikaru, I've been so worried! You just wouldn't wake up! How do you feel?"

A little bit embarrassed, he hugged her back. "I'm fine, mom. But I won't be fine anymore if you squeeze me to death!"

From the background, the doctor smiled. "Yes, Shindou-san, your son has a point there. Would you please move aside so that I can ascertain that he is indeed as well as he looks?"

Two hours and several hundred questions later, Hikaru and his relieved mother were on their way home. After finding absolutely nothing wrong, the doctor had finally claimed that Hikaru must have

overexerted himself at soccer practice. Sai, of course, had immediately asked what 'soccer' was, but Hikaru had ignored his question in favor of agreeing with the doctor. He had ignored Sai for more or less the whole time, trying to behave as normally as possible.

Now though, Hikaru had to take a lot of care not to stare at the ghost trailing them. Sai was 'ooh'ing and 'aaah'ing over the most simple things, running from one 'sight' to the next and asking questions a mile a minute. Hikaru got a lot of practice talking to his mother while at the same time giving Sai some basic explanations. Privately Hikaru thought that the ghost must have been caught in the golan for a very long time if he was unfamiliar with toilets (1), cars, and electricity. Not to mention sunglasses, sky scrapers, planes, traffic lights, neon signs, current fashion, and whatever else the ghost found to exclaim over.

By the time they arrived at home, Hikaru was nursing a headache. He gladly accepted his mom's offer to lie down for a bit until lunch. Sai of course had to follow him, spending quite some time admiring Hikaru's room and asking further questions. When Hikaru's answers got more and more monosyllabic, the ghost finally got the hint and fell quiet.

Blessed silence.

"Ne, Hikaru?"

"... What."

"Can we play Go now?"

Hikaru was starting to wonder how one could possibly go about strangling an immaterial spirit. He'd have to get rid of the ghost as soon as possible. "I already told you," he ground out, "I. Don't. Play. Go!"

"I could teach you." Sai's hopeful voice had a desperate note in it. But Hikaru didn't feel very generous. The ghost was a nuisance.

"Not interested." Hikaru's headache intensified, and he began to feel vaguely sick to his stomach.

The desperate tone in Sai's voice grew worse. "Well... if there's someone around to play, I could tell you where to move the stones..."

Hikaru's frown deepened. That was right. Nobody could see or hear the ghost, and since the ghost didn't seem to be able to touch anything, Hikaru would have to help him play that boring game. He could think of several hundred things more interesting to do. "No way. I'd have to play for you, and there's no way I want to get a reputation as a Go geek. I'd never hear the end of it from my friends. And anyway, playing Go is boring."

Hikaru couldn't stand to look at Sai's tearful eyes. "You mean that... I'll never play Go again?"

Before Hikaru could answer though, he suddenly felt so nauseous that he sprinted out of his room to the bathroom. It didn't take long for him to lose the little that had been in his stomach, and then he felt a little better. Sai had come with him, hovering over him in concern. "Are you alright?"

Hikaru nodded mutely, still feeling a bit shaky. "But I'm still not going to play Go for you."

He suddenly was violently ill once again, hearing dimly how the ghost wailed about being stuck forever without Go. What was it that he had thought earlier in the hospital? That the ghost didn't have any malicious intentions? He should have known that someone so harmless-looking would turn out really evil.

Will you stop it, please? he finally sent desperately, too preoccupied with the porcelain bowl to speak properly.

"Stop what?"

Whatever you're doing to make me so sick! His nausea had been a little bit too coincidentally at the same time he had told Sai he wouldn't get to play Go again. How could the ghost do that to him? Wasn't the ghost immaterial?

"Huh?"

Sai's confusion fortunately eased Hikaru's stomach considerably so that he could rinse his mouth and flush the toilet. Since his throat hurt, Hikaru kept sending his thoughts instead of speaking aloud. *So you didn't deliberately make me sick?*

"No! I would never do such a despicable thing!" Sai sounded honestly indignant. "But it might be that, since I am in your mind, you might get some overspill from my emotions..."

Hikaru palmed his head. *Just great. Now I've not only got to put up with your constant Go talk, but also keep you happy if I don't want to get sick every five minutes?*

Sai looked dejected. "I'm sorry, but I can't help my emotions. Just the thought of never being able to play Go again..."

Stop! Hikaru was beginning to feel sick again, and he really didn't feel like repeating the last few minutes a third time. *I never said you'd never be able to play Go again! I only said I refuse to be seen as a Go player.* Well, that actually wasn't what he had said, but a change of tactics was in order. Until he found a way to get rid of the ghost, he'd just have to play along and keep that nuisance happy.

"But how else can I play? I can't touch anything, and nobody else can see or hear me..."

They were interrupted by Hikaru's mother asking from the other side of the door. "Hikaru? Are you alright?"

Throwing the ghost a venomous glare, Hikaru called back with feigned levity. "Sure. I just had to go to the bathroom real quick. I'm gonna be out in a sec." He added, for Sai only to hear: *I'll have to check online. There might be some way you can play Go on the 'Net.*

"What net? I've never played Go on a net. Won't the stones fall off the knots?"

Hikaru had just unlocked the door when Sai's comment came. He almost fell over. Grinning like a loon at that strange mental picture, he exited, having trouble not to laugh out loud.

His mother gave him a concerned stare, and he felt the need to explain his sudden gaiety. "A joke Takano-kun told me yesterday during soccer practice. Eh... I don't think I should repeat it though..." He trailed off with feigned embarrassment.

Answering with a smile, his mother sounded very relieved. "Since you remembered it in the bathroom, I'm quite sure I don't want to know. Well, as long as you're alright... Lunch will be in thirty minutes, so I'm not sure if you want to lie down again."

"Nah. Can I go on the Internet though? I need to look something up."

Inwardly he crossed his fingers, hoping that she'd make an exception today. Normally, he wasn't allowed on the computer before his homework was finished, unless it was something to help him with his homework. And since the only computer in the house was in his father's office...

"And just what do you need to look up?"

"Eh..." Darn, his mother didn't sound very convinced. Then he had an idea. "Some book conspiracy guy (2). For history. What's his name again..." *Quick, Sai, what was the name of that guy who left those bloodstains on the goban?*

Sai sounded as unconvinced as his mother looked. "Torajirou, you mean? Kuwabara Torajirou, but later he took the name of Hon'inbou Shuusaku."

Hikaru perked up as if he had just remembered. "Ah! Hon'inbou Shuusaku. We're supposed to find out about him as much as we can."

"Alright," his mother finally conceded, "go ahead. But I want to hear at least three facts about this 'book conspiracy guy' at lunch. Otherwise no more computer for you today."

Hikaru practically bounced with energy. "Ok! Thanks, mom!" He was getting good at improvising in sticky situations!

Jogging into his father's home office, he quickly switched on the computer. Since his father was, once again, on a business trip in America, Hikaru had free reign over the machine. Well, he would have free reign if his mother didn't strictly regulate his time on the computer. No computer before 7:30 p.m., and especially not before all homework was done. Really, he was quite lucky she had allowed him to go on the Internet before noon.

Sai looked very doubtful. He seemed to be rather nervous at the sight of the unfamiliar technology. "What kind of magic is this? This box - it's glowing, Hikaru! How are you going to find anything about Torajirou in there? And I thought I could play Go?"

Hikaru rolled his eyes. Honestly, the ghost's ignorance of modern technology was quickly becoming old. *This is a computer. The glowing box is the screen, where I'll see what I'm doing. And the Internet, Net for short, connects many computers all over the world. So I hope there's someone around who wants to play you through the computer.*

"Really?" Between his nervousness, Sai's enthusiasm began to show through.

Yeah. But it's not as easy as I just made it sound, so I'll have to find out how to play Go on the computer, first. And mom expects me to look up information on Hon'inbou, too. I just hope he was important enough that there's something about him around... would be a bit suspicious if I knew tons about a guy nobody else knows.

Certain that he had thoroughly confused the ghost now, Hikaru smirked. Then he began the harrowing task of trying to find a place for Sai to play Go. And maybe he could try and dig up some sites on exorcism when the ghost wasn't looking.

Twenty minutes later, he leaned back in his chair with a victorious smile on his face. Those websites were hard to read, but he thought he had gotten the gist. *Alright! There's a way for you to play as much Go as you like. Didn't know there're so many crazy people...*

"Oh, Hikaru, thank you so much! Can we play now? Please?"

Despite not being able to touch Hikaru physically, the ghost hung from his neck in a tight embrace, squealing in happiness. From Sai's spilling emotions, Hikaru became giddy and excited, too, but that was much better than getting sick to his stomach.

He sighed. This was going to take some getting used to before he found a way to rid himself of the ghost. *No, we can't play now. First off, I'd like to establish some rules, and secondly -*

"What rules?" Sai interrupted. For the usually polite ghost, this had to mean he was as tightly wound as a coil.

Although Hikaru had quickly found out how to control the volume of his mental voice, ranting mentally at the ghost nonetheless felt far less relieving than doing so out loud would. It just didn't convey his level of frustration the same way an angry shout would. *Well, I've got a life, too! I've got school until the afternoon, then there's soccer practice and homework, and I've also got some other friends. None of that has anything to do with Go! I'll promise to let you play at least one game a day in the evening, but then you'll have to promise to*

leave me alone the rest of the day. I can't have you make me alternatively giddy and sick with your emotions.

Slowly, Sai nodded. "Very well. But, since I am in your mind, I'm bound to stay within a few shaku of your body. I can promise not to deliberately distract you, but nothing else. And then I'll get to play a game every day, yes?"

Yeah. In the evening when I'm allowed on the computer. Alright, you got yourself a deal. Now, let's see what the internet knows about Hon'inbou Shuusaku...

To Hikaru's surprise, there was a lot of information. Both Sai and Hikaru had some trouble reading the pages because Hikaru didn't know all kanji, and Sai wasn't used to computer-printed characters. But together, they made good work, with a few exclamations at interesting parts - *You're the one who played, not Shuusaku, right? They call you the Go Saint here. You got to be really good at Go! and You slept for more than 130 years!?! No wonder you've never heard of soccer...*

When they were interrupted by Hikaru's mother, both Hikaru and Sai were reluctantly awed. Sai by the amount of information the 'magic box' had on Torajirou, and Hikaru by the amount of people praising Shuusaku's, i.e. Sai's, skills.

Life was going to become interesting. Now, if Hikaru only had more pocket money, and maybe an exorcist handy...

(1) Sai being unfamiliar with toilets: Hikaru means Western toilets with that comment, those you sit down on (Japanese versions usually have some additional high-tech features). Other toilets, like pit toilets or squat toilets cleaned by running water (the Japanese have their own very special version there, too), have been around for a lot longer than Sai.

(2) Book conspiracy guy: If you only hear the name Hon'inbou, you could think it consists of hon = book and inbou = plot intrigue / conspiracy. The kanji version of Hon'inbou though divides the word into hon = book, in = cause / factor and bou = monk (both 'in' and 'bou' are different kanji from the 'in' and 'bou' in 'conspiracy')

A/N : Well, what do you think of the first chapter? Most of this story is already done, so updates should be reasonably quick for a time.

Sakiku

Chapter 3

A/N: Thanks to Amarthame for betaing this. Without her, it would be much worse... Disclaimer etc. in Chapter 1

Edit 12/20: SuperiorShortness discovered that I accidentally changed Waya from 8-dan to 7-dan over the course of this story. Now fixed.

Chapter 2

It already was past ten at night and business was winding down in Ichigaya (1). Even in a metropolis like Tokyo, people normally were at home so late at night. Of course, there were enough all-night-swarms around that he could have had customers round the clock, but he ran Igo Ramen all on his own. And a single person could only work so many hours a day.

Igo Ramen usually opened from 11 till 2, and then from 4:30 till 10 or 11, depending on the amount of business he got. It was exhausting work, but he liked cooking his ramen. Only for cleaning he called someone in for an hour a day. Nakamura-san really was a nice woman, keeping everything impeccably sparkling.

Hikaru was debating with himself whether he should turn off the fire beneath the cooking pots when he heard the door chimes jingle. He looked up from his boiling pots, catching sight of the person standing in front of the counter. He smiled in recognition of the greenish-black hair and the tired face beneath the trademark bowl-cut.

"Ah, Touya-sensei! Finally done with your title-game? Do you have to play Ogata-sensei in Wakayama next month or have you become Kisei again?"

Touya Akira, the first of the New Wave as the group of excellent young professionals was called, was a somewhat regular customer at Igo-Ramen. He came by about once or twice a month, always ordering the same. Most of the time, he was quiet and a little bit awkward. It was mostly Hikaru who had to hold up their conversations, but Hikaru didn't really mind. Behind the socially inept exterior, Touya was quite nice, not at all stuck-up like so many said. Sometimes, Hikaru thought he was the only one who Touya actually could talk to freely. Hikaru wasn't an opponent, a pupil, a fan, a journalist, or someone who would report his every word to the next gossip rag. Yes, Hikaru admired Touya and what he had accomplished, but he still saw the person behind the fame.

Touya nodded to Hikaru's question. "I won."

Seven years ago, Touya had become Kisei for the first time, setting a few new records along the way: Youngest Kisei at barely eighteen, only player so far to be directly promoted from 5p to 9p via the new rules introduced in 2004 (2), and youngest Japanese 9-dan. A year later, he had lost the title again but gained Ouza instead.

When his father, better known as Touya Meijin (3), had died together with his mother in a plane crash four years ago, he had gone into a slump, losing all his titles within a short period of time. After taking more than 14 months of hiatus from his Go career, Touya Akira had returned with renewed vigor. Last year, he had managed the jump into Hon'inbou and Kisei League again, and challenged for Juudan and Gosei. This year, he was still involved in both Tengen and Juudan tournament, and currently challenging Ogata Kisei for his title. They had already played five of the seven games, Touya winning three so far. Today had been their sixth game, which had finally swayed things in Touya's favor.

"Congratulations, Touya Kisei," Hikaru smiled. "Your usual again?"

"Yes, please. And some hot water, if you have it."

"No problem. Have a seat."

Hikaru busied himself preparing the meal, leaving the Go professional to his thoughts. One of Igo-Ramen's unspoken policies was to never bother any customers. It was a place to eat and relax, not to give interviews or worship celebrities. If Touya wanted to talk about his game, that was fine with Hikaru. But if not, Hikaru would see the kifu in the next Go Weekly, like everybody else.

"Do you have some kifu paper?"

Surprised, Hikaru looked up from chopping scallions. It was rare that Touya made such requests, but he assumed that the young pro was still too preoccupied with some details of his game and wanted to write something down. Hikaru set the knife aside. "Sure. Hang on a sec', got to wash my hands first... Here you go. Pen, too?"

"Thank you very much. And I have my own pen."

"Alright."

They were interrupted by the beeping of the noodle timer, and Hikaru turned back to preparing Touya's meal. When he placed the steaming bowl in front of the man, Touya was busy filling one corner of the paper with an intricate dance of white and black moves. Interestingly enough, the rest of the game was missing. Just that one corner, almost like a tsumego.

Capping his pen, Touya gave the paper one last look before sliding it over the counter in Hikaru's direction. "Here," the Go professional mumbled in a detached voice and circled a stone. "This is black's last move. How should white respond?"

Confused, Hikaru took the paper. Was this supposed to be some kind of challenge or payment? Was this part of the game just played, or was this something completely different? Was Touya trying his hand at creating tsumego?

Touya calmly broke his chopsticks, eyes lost in a far-away look. He started eating almost mechanically, but occasionally flickered a

curious glance at Hikaru. He didn't seem inclined to explain though.

Deciding to humor the pro, Hikaru studied the problem he had just been handed. It was as intricate and difficult as he had first thought, and he was fortunate that there were no other customers around at the moment. This wasn't one of the problems that could be solved within ten seconds, or even a minute.

Hikaru lost himself in the flow of the stones, and tried to read ahead to discover all possible responses. He evaluated and reevaluated positions, trying to see what Touya was getting at. It wasn't a nice tsumego with aesthetic shapes or lines. It was twisted and curving, black and white struggling for every single moku. It was an incredibly tight battle, no line clearly cut.

As far as he could read, it wasn't really a life-or-death problem. There was no way that black would be able to kill white. And he couldn't see a reliable way to kill all, or part of black's stones. He saw a way to prevent black from forming a second eye, but no way to prevent it from connecting to stones at the edge of the problem. From there on, it would all depend on what the rest of the board looked like.

He finally lowered the paper, just in time to see Touya fish the last of his noodles out of the broth. He immediately switched to the gears of helpful restaurant owner. "Do you want another helping of noodles?"

For a small extra charge, he offered his customers a refill of noodles. Most opted for that instead of ordering a complete second bowl. But then, not many were hungry anymore after their first bowl.

Touya looked up at him, startled, clearly very far away with his thoughts. "Sorry?"

"Do you want a refill?"

Touya glanced down into his bowl, apparently surprised that there was only broth and a few greens left. He looked back at Hikaru with

a small smile. "No, thank you. It was delicious as always, but I'm full." He nodded towards the paper in Hikaru's hands. "Did you find anything?"

Shrugging, Hikaru placed the paper on the counter so that both could see. He grabbed a pen to point at certain intersections. "Not really. If white manages to play those two key spots, it can prevent black from getting two eyes (4). But any scenario I could come up with ended with black connecting its groups to one of the groups here on the outside. Then it would all depend on how many eyes those outside groups are capable of forming."

For a long time, Touya was silent, frozen in mid-motion. Then, slowly, he nodded to himself. "So that's why. Damage control..." A tired smile spread over Touya's features. "Thank you very much, Shindou-san. You are very skilled."

Hikaru shrugged his shoulders, bashful at the pro's praise. "Eh, if you think so... If you don't mind, may I ask what that was all about?"

At first Touya drew his brows in confusion, but then he blushed in embarrassment. "Oh, I'm very sorry. I was too involved thinking about the game today to realize how strange my request must have seemed.

"This last move of black here, the one I marked, is the one I thought Ogata-san should have made. Instead, he went for the lower of the two key spots you identified. He sacrificed this whole group to make an eye and connect it to that group on the edge, which later on got another eye. I had thought he should have been able to live without connecting to the outside. But now that I think of it, this group couldn't have lived on its own. I thought he made a mistake with the sacrifice, but by going there he prevented the loss of the whole group. Something I didn't even see."

Eyes widening considerably, Hikaru viewed the problem again. This was part of today's title match? No wonder he couldn't find a clear-

cut solution - it wasn't a proper tsumego, and half of the important information wasn't included.

It took a lot of time and a lot of effort to make good tsumego, and especially to make sure that there was only one solution. But in a real game, there rarely were straight answers. It all depended on the goal, whether one wanted to live, to run, to kill, to maximize territory, to minimize damage, to deceive, to gain sente,... Most tsumego already gave the goal, and one only had to find the way. In a game, one had to decide which goal was the best, whether it was attainable, and then look for a way.

Hikaru admired the intricacies of play that were already visible in this small section of the whole board. "This looks like a superb game," he marveled. "And you won, despite that mis-read. Again, congratulations for making Kisei."

Touya's smile looked a bit forced. "Thank you. But you are very good yourself, Shindou-san. Your problem solving skills are indeed as high as Waya 7-dan has praised."

Hikaru almost raised an eyebrow. It was no secret that Touya 9-dan and Waya 7-dan couldn't stand each other. Well, the animosity originated not so much from Touya's side but from Waya's. When Waya had eaten here with some of his friends from the New Wave, the lively pro had complained about 'that stuck-up, anti-social ass of a player' more than once.

Yes, Waya knew that Hikaru was good with tsumego - Hikaru had once told him that he made all the Go-special problems himself to avoid any trouble concerning copy-right and such. That had been after Waya had demanded a Go-special and, after goggling at the two sheets Hikaru had handed him, asked just where the hell he had gotten such hard problems from.

Yes, Waya knew about his skills, but Hikaru was quite certain that Waya would never voluntarily talk to Touya. So either Touya had overheard Waya talking to someone else, or he had been challenged

by Waya to order one of the Go-specials and seen through the ploy. Hikaru suspected the latter.

Thanking Touya for his kind words, Hikaru felt quite embarrassed to get such praise from the pro. Hikaru knew he was good - his games on the internet proved that - but that was quite different from hearing someone he respected very much say it to his face. Especially someone who didn't even know half of Hikaru's strength.

After a bit more small-talk, the Go pro, his last customer for that day, left. When Hikaru had finished closing the shop, it was already half past eleven. For a weekday, this was later than he normally closed, but still earlier than on weekends. He easily had enough time for a quick game or two on the net before he'd finally go to bed between two and three in the morning. He never opened shop before eleven a.m. anyway.

Smiling slightly, he thought back to his first experiences with Internet Go. It had been before he had known how to play Go at all, turning it into a harrowing procedure of moving stones for Sai without knowing what exactly he was doing. He thought it bordered on a miracle that this hadn't turned him away from Go forever. But then again, he had to thank Sai for that, too.

Two weeks after the ghost had arrived, Hikaru was ready to tear his hair out in frustration. True to his word, he had made sure to play at least one game a day for the ghost. As he had thought, the ghost was really good, never losing a game yet. But Hikaru hadn't thought winning would be so darned boring! For heaven's sake, most of the time he only realized that Sai had won when his opponent resigned.

How long was it going to take to find a reliable way to get rid of the ghost?

Normally, Sai finished his games within less than 45 minutes. But whenever Hikaru felt the ghost get excited in his head, he really had to keep himself from screaming. Sai getting excited meant that he

was playing a good opponent, which meant that the game would easily last ninety minutes or more.

Hikaru was very grateful for the time limit that both players had - he had never changed it from its default setting of half an hour plus sixty seconds, which was more than enough in his opinion. He still had to shudder at Sai's tales of not having any time limit in the past. It was boring enough watching minutes pass by, but he knew he would have gone insane a long time ago if there hadn't been any end in sight.

Most of the time, Sai made his moves so quickly that he didn't use up his allotted thirty minutes and it was his opponent who dragged it out. But whenever Sai got a good opponent, he spent more time thinking, meaning both of them used their thirty minutes, meaning the game would definitely last more than an hour, not even accounting for byou-yomi yet. And then, more often than not, he had to relay Sai's answers to his opponent's questions. He didn't even understand half of the terms they were talking about.

Really, Hikaru was close to doing something drastic.

And as if that wasn't enough, Sai was even beginning to ask whether they couldn't play real opponents. Sai liked the 'box with opponents' well enough, but apparently the ghost had something against not being able to see the person he played with.

At least during the day, Sai kept to his promise of staying quiet. More often than not, it was Hikaru contacting the ghost than the other way round. And Sai turned out to be a veritable fount of history and could help him with his kanji during Japanese lessons. However, the ghost was useless with English and mathematics, not to mention all the sciences.

But, although he wasn't happy about it, Sai nagging him to do his homework so that they could play a game later on was slowly paying off. The last biology test, he had almost passed!

He once again clicked on the grid-line Sai called out, idly swinging his feet. He was becoming quite good at reading coordinates. Thankfully, this opponent made his responses reasonably quickly, and Sai had giddily exclaimed something about Hayago. Hikaru counted himself thankful that Sai's excitement didn't doom him to another ninety minutes of staring into space. With a name like Hayago, Lightning Go, he doubted that the game would last that long, especially as the board already was half filled and they had been playing for less than twenty minutes.

Indeed, only fifteen minutes later, Sai's opponent resigned and Hikaru automatically typed Sai's standard response of 'Thank you for the game'. Sai fielded a few more questions about the game, but Hikaru refused to answer any personal ones. When they were done, it was only half past eight, still an hour until his bed-time. To Hikaru's horror, that was more than enough time to play another game. Sai apparently knew that, too, as he already started pestering Hikaru again.

"Ne, Hikaru, can we play another game? If we play Hayago again, we should be finished a long time before you have to go to bed!"

Hikaru had to grit his teeth to not scream at the ghost. He was really getting sick and tired of this Go obsession. Finally he had himself enough under control to answer half-way civilly. *No. You had your game today, and I don't think I can stand another hour of this boring nonsense.*

This proved to be the wrong thing to say as Sai immediately started wailing, mortally offended. "But, Hikaru, that's not true! Go is the game of gods, and it definitely isn't boring! With Go, you can create your own heaven of stars, the meeting of brilliant minds! Go is as important as life!!!"

Hikaru huffed. *I don't believe that. Go's stupid, just a bunch of black and white stones you throw onto the board randomly. If that's the game of gods, they really gotta be some boring old geezers up there.*

Sai pouted and hid the lower half of his face behind the annoying fan he never seemed to be without. "You only say that because you don't understand how Go works."

Well, see how well you like a game when nobody tells you how it works!

"I offered to teach you, but you said you didn't want to. I will have you know that I was a Go tutor for more than a decade while I was alive, and I taught children as young as five years old. I can show you, but this will not help anything if you don't allow yourself to understand."

Bristling at the edges, Hikaru protested. *You want to say I can't understand what even a five-year-old brat can? If a twerp can understand it, then I can too! Show me!*

Hikaru almost slapped his hands in front of his mouth to take back those words. He really, really didn't want to learn anything about Go, but that had slipped out. And Sai was already capitalizing on his mistake.

"Oh, Hikaru! It's been so long that I've had a student! Ne, Hikaru, I'm going to be a really great teacher for you! Quick, quick do you have a board somewhere so that I can show you the basic rules?"

Hikaru had the sinking feeling that he'd just been had. *Hey, wait a minute, I never said anything about...*

"Not to worry! Go is really easy! Come on, I'll show you! Or do you really think you can't understand what children much younger than you can?"

Yes, he had been manipulated into this agreement. But his pride wouldn't let him back out now. Grumbling, he opened the program he'd had to download together with his NetGo access program. It was a program where one could replay games, or play entire games on one's own. He used it to set down a black stone right next to one

of the intersections that were marked with a black dot, like he had seen Sai and some of Sai's opponents do. *Well, what am I supposed to do now?* he groused.

From then on, Sai explained the basics of who won the game, counting territory, some simple terms, how to capture, how to live and kill, how to make eyes, and so much more. At first, Hikaru had been completely confused what Sai meant, but as soon as Sai started showing him examples he realized he already knew most of it from watching Sai play.

When his mother finally informed him it was time to go to bed, he grumbled to himself. *And I still don't believe that a five year old would understand all that. Simple, he says...*

Sai smiled at him, waving his fan slightly. "Well, you are both right and wrong, Hikaru. A five year old would understand that, but it would take him a lot longer. A seven year old, on the other hand..."

Why, you! Hikaru exploded. *I'll show you! There's no way that a seven year old twerp is better than me!*

Sai merely kept smiling.

When Hikaru realized that he had fallen into Sai's trap once again, he had to restrain himself from banging his head against the wall. He couldn't believe he had said that...

The next evening, Hikaru adamantly refused to discuss what had happened last night. There was no way he was going to play along with the ghost's evil manipulations. He had a reputation to maintain, after all. And he'd get rid of the ghost sooner or later, anyway.

He ignored all of Sai's suggestions towards continuing their lessons and logged in under Sai's name. With a raised eyebrow, he turned towards the ghost.

Sai examined him for a long time, then sighed. The ghost didn't say anything, but suggested a random player to challenge. Just like he had always done so far.

As usual, Hikaru was only Sai's arm, moving where he was told to. He was still cross with the ghost for making him spend so much time on Go and trying to infect Hikaru with his love for that old-people-game. It still looked like random black and white stones to him. But even he could see that it was Sai who was chasing his opponent across the board, systematically hunting and destroying him.

Since *metallover* (5) was very slow with his moves, thirty minutes had already passed and they weren't even fifty hands into the game. Hikaru prepared himself for another boring half an hour. He was frowning more and more, wondering what exactly *metallover* was doing. Even he, with less than 24 hours of real Go experience, could see that *metallover* was hopelessly outclassed, but the guy just wouldn't resign. Couldn't that *metallover* be so kind and shorten Hikaru's torture a bit? Sai, too, seemed a bit annoyed at *metallover*'s futile tenacity, the first time Hikaru had observed such an emotion in the ghost.

Suddenly, he blinked. *Eh, what the...*

"What the what?" Even Sai's speech was curter than normal.

Hikaru answered before remembering that this could be misinterpreted as an interest in Go on his part. *What the heck is that guy doing? Why did he place his stone there? Doesn't he see that he's just killing his own group faster?*

He felt a suppressed wave of giddiness and excitement - definitely not his own. What had Sai so wound up now? Hikaru was quite sure that, this time, it wasn't his opponent. The game with *metallover* was a slaughter, and Hikaru had already found out that Sai liked to be challenged.

Looking up at the ghost, he saw that Sai was smiling down at him.

What? What are you grinning at? he asked crossly. He knew it had been a mistake to say anything.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," Sai hastened to reassure him. "But why couldn't it be a trap?"

A trap? Hikaru frowned, trying to make sense of all the patterns. *What kind of trap is that supposed to be? One where he kills himself?*

"What about distracting me from an attack?"

But... how can this be a distraction when it's your turn now? Hikaru was confused. *You don't even have to respond because he's doing quite a fine job of defeating himself already.*

"Hm. Then I suppose you were right after all."

Hikaru looked up again to see if Sai was mocking him, but the ghost had firmly hidden his mouth behind his accursed fan again, looking only at the computer screen.

"14-3."

So Sai was moving in to capture after all. With a frown, Hikaru clicked the point. Ten hands later, *metallover* finally resigned. If it had been supposed to be a trap or a distraction, then definitely one that had backfired spectacularly.

When Sai asked whether they could play another game because there was still enough time left, Hikaru refused adamantly. It was bad enough being forced to play Go for the ghost all the time, but it was even worse when Sai's opponent was just plain dumb. No thanks, one game against someone like *metallover* was more than enough.

Hm... There was still an hour until his bedtime, so he could play some Need For Speed. It had been ages since he had played one of his regular computer games instead of boring Go. Yes, that was just

what he needed that night, and the ghost could go hang himself if he didn't like it.

(1) Ichigaya: The part of Tokyo where the Nihon Ki-in is located. Since Hikaru's ramen restaurant isn't far, I assumed it was the same neighborhood.

(2) New rules: Oteai matches (the ranking games all Go pros participated in) were abolished in 2004. Nowadays, one has to have either a certain number of wins to advance to the next rank, or win one of the seven big titles. Challenging for Gosei, Ouza, Juudan, or Tengen gives instant 7p, and so does getting into Honinbou league, Kisei league or Meijin league. Winning Gosei, Ouza, Juudan or Tengen gives instant 8p, and so does challenging for Honinbou, Kisei, or Meijin. Defending Gosei, Ouza, Juudan, or Tengen gives instant 9p, and so does winning Honinbou, Kisei, or Meijin. Thus instant promotion from 5p to 9p for Akira when he won Kisei.

(3) Touya Meijin: For current title-holders, their title is added to their name like a suffix. However, if one manages to hold a title for 5 or more consecutive years (I think it was five), one may call oneself that title no matter whether one is currently in its possession or not.

(4) Two eyes: A group of stones with two eyes is alive and unkillable. An eye for Black is a free intersection where at least seven of the eight surrounding intersections are blocked by black stones.

(5) Apologies to any *metallover* out there. I chose this name by coincidence, not as an insult to someone. For that matter, I don't even know any *metallover* s, especially not one who plays Go. This goes for any and all internet handles I make up over the course of this story.

A/N: EsaMaRie asked that I update soon, so here's the update, very soon. This is a first glance at Hikaru's Go skills, but I can tell you one thing right now: Hikaru's growth has been a lot slower than in the

manga. In the manga, the greatest part of his growth took place after he joined the insei - here, he never even started his rivalry with Touya. Here, he didn't have that incessant drive to better himself, so it is only logical that he progressed much slower. You will have to wait and see how far he has come...

Sakiku

Chapter 4

A/N:

I think this warrants a note at the very top: My Go-skills don't go beyond absolute beginner, and I think this is visible in some of the descriptions. However, since Go and Hikaru are inextricably linked, it wouldn't be a good fanfic if I left it out completely (at least I haven't found a good way to get around it). On many things, I give it my best guess based on research and what I do know, but please don't take it for the gospel.

Again, thanks to Amarthame and her incredible help.

Chapter 3

Hikaru frowned at the screen. If he wanted to be able to get up the next morning in time to open his Igo Ramen, he had to go to bed soon. But this was *seiji*. It was a rare occurrence that *seiji* was online at all, even rarer at the hours Hikaru played. And the rarest thing of them all (read: it had happened only one time, at the very beginning) was that *seiji* had challenged him to a match.

And he really, really wanted to play *seiji* again.

Seven years ago, he had played *seiji* for the first time. At that time, Sai had been gone for less than two months, and Hikaru had felt incredibly lonely after six years of Sai's constant presence. He hadn't given up playing Go completely, but he hadn't really enjoyed it, either. It had been so different without Sai hovering over his shoulder all the time. He had just moved his stones without any spirit behind.

Then *seiji* had challenged him. *seiji* had been an unranked 5-kyu, nothing special at first glance. Hikaru actually had thought *seiji* was suicidal, because *seiji* had demanded an even game. In the end,

Hikaru had agreed and started placing stones carelessly. After a few hands though, he had been forced to play more seriously than he had ever played on NetGo. To Hikaru's surprise, he'd been forced to resign before middle game had been over.

Afterwards, he had researched just who the heck *seiji* was - Hikaru had already been a 7d amateur back then, the highest ranking NetGo awarded its players. And playing *seiji* had felt almost like playing Sai, going against an unbeatable force. Not that their styles had been similar, but *seiji* had slaughtered him just like Sai had always done.

It had woken memories of the ghost that Hikaru had wanted to suppress.

The first information, a very strange record of straight wins against people higher than 4d, and a curious mixture of wins and losses against people of lower ranks, had been- well, startling. After Hikaru had played him, he strongly suspected that all those losses had been resigns on *seiji* 's part because of impatience.

Either that, or *seiji* 's account was played by more than one player.

Anyway, because of this curious disparity in strength, *seiji* had been unranked. Not like *sai* ; *sai* had been unranked for a long time because of straight wins. Sai would never have thrown a game just because the other player wasn't as good as he would have liked.

The second-most interesting tidbit he had managed to uncover had been a website dedicated to professional Go players and their internet handles. *seiji* had been listed there, too, as possibly belonging to Ogata Seiji, Hon'inbou at that time. Hikaru had immediately researched all kifu of Ogata Hon'inbou he had been able to get his hands on, and he'd had to admit that his style had been eerily similar to Hikaru's opponent's.

If that was true, it was no wonder he had lost the match so badly. The highest amateur rank on NetGo compared approximately to the

skills of a shodan, lowest professional rank. And Ogata Hon'inbou had been a nine-dan for several years already.

In the end, Hikaru hadn't done any more research; if Ogata wanted to have the anonymity of the Internet, who was Hikaru to deny him? And if it wasn't Ogata - well, after his own experience with Sai, he could hardly talk.

But Hikaru had played *seiji* again and again, challenging him whenever he saw the name online. In the beginning, it had been his way of getting back something of Sai. But very quickly, Hikaru tried his best out of a desire to overcome *seiji* after seeing that every time, he lost by less.

Because of Hikaru's late working hours and *seiji* 's sporadic attendance, those games happened perhaps once every two months. Their last game six weeks ago, he'd been able to finish with a loss of only 4.5 moku. It had been his best game so far, and in his own unfriendly manner, *seiji* had even complimented him by saying that it had taken Hikaru long enough to finally find his guts and finish a game. In *seiji* 's backhand way that meant that, from now on, he expected Hikaru to always play well enough to fight *seiji* until the end.

Coming from someone Hikaru suspected to be a titleholder, that meant a lot. Especially now that *seiji* actually took the initiative and challenged him. Hikaru was ecstatic, even if *seiji* probably only wanted to play him to take his mind off losing Kisei to Touya two days ago.

If only there wasn't that pesky little problem of work tomorrow.

On the other hand, he was his own boss. If he closed early after lunch and opened late for dinner, he could catch two or three hours of sleep in the afternoon. That should be enough to keep him going until the dinner rush was over.

Smiling slightly to himself, he accepted *seiji* 's challenge.

They exchanged the customary greeting, and then Hikaru placed the first stone as he had drawn black.

In the beginning, there were only vague areas of influence, nothing definite. Those areas of influence however laid the foundations upon which all their later shapes would build. The true fights would come later on, but without a good base they would be almost impossible to win.

It was a delicate art to know when to be forceful and attack, and when to enforce his position. It was a mind-bending struggle to not let his game be dictated by his opponent, and neither to be too aggressive and overextend. *seiji* was crafty beyond all measure, delighting in setting up traps many hands before actually springing them. *seiji* also was uncannily good at discovering the purpose behind Hikaru's moves, hidden or not, doing so at a speed that baffled Hikaru.

In addition, *seiji* was absolutely ruthless, never hesitating to slaughter Hikaru whenever he saw a possibility. In that respect, *seiji* was very similar to Sai. Except for a rare few teaching games, Sai had always slaughtered Hikaru, no matter how many handicap stones Hikaru demanded.

Well, towards the end of their time together, Hikaru supposed that he could have played Sai evenly at three stones, but most of the time, Hikaru had insisted on less than he actually needed.

Against *seiji*, he had never played with a handicap. Not even reversed komi or no komi. No, they had played evenly all the time. And *seiji* had always defeated him despite not going all out, as Hikaru suspected. He doubted that *seiji* played as seriously on the net as he did in real life. After all, NetGo probably was a way to relax for the pro. Games on the net were quick, and most opponents couldn't even think of measuring up to *seiji*'s skill.

Hikaru hoped he would leave that group of people today. He hoped that he'd once again be able to finish the game within a reasonable

difference in moku.

Slowly, more and more territory got claimed, and attacks on enemy lines became more frequent. Hikaru's stones twisted upon themselves in a bid to encircle *seiji*'s before they were encircled in turn. In the upper left corner, a ko-fight emerged, but after a few exchanges, Hikaru relented in favor of reinforcing his claim on the center. He wanted to save his ko-threats for another fight he could see building ten or eleven hands down the line.

So far, both Hikaru and *seiji* were almost equal in territory, with *seiji* being at a slight advantage because komi was in his favor. Hikaru knew that he probably wouldn't be able to catch up to *seiji* anymore, but he wanted to play the game to its bitter end. He wanted to show *seiji* that last time, losing by only 4.5 moku, hadn't been a fluke.

So he desperately tried to break up White's shapes while preventing White from invading his own. He fought for every moku when, all of a sudden, *seiji* seemed to hesitate. *seiji* took almost the entire rest of his thinking time, nearly ten minutes, to place his next stone. Hikaru hadn't been idle in the meantime, trying to read what had *seiji* spooked so much that it took him that long to make his move.

With any player other than *seiji*, he would have supposed that they were taking a bathroom break, a coffee break, talking on the phone, or something similar. But not with *seiji*. *seiji* was too focused for that. Even if *seiji* did take a bathroom break, he wouldn't stop thinking about the game, trying to read ahead to a startling depth and width (1).

No. It had to be something else, but for his life, Hikaru couldn't figure out what. The position of the last hand wasn't that unusual; it was one of Black's possible responses to White's peek at 13-6. Hikaru hadn't thought long about his move as it was one of his standard answers, and he had already considered several strategies for *seiji* to deal with the threat. Did *seiji* see something he hadn't?

Finally, *seiji* played one of the two hands Hikaru had expected the most. Hikaru decided that second-guessing wouldn't help him much and went with the move he had planned in advance.

From then on, the game flowed smoothly once again. Ten hands passed. Twenty. Thirty hands, and Hikaru was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. But until the end, nothing happened. The game ended almost anticlimactically in a 3.5 moku loss for Hikaru.

Before Hikaru could even think about asking *seiji* what his hesitation had meant, *seiji* messaged him, foregoing any form of politeness as usual.

-sai taught you.-

seiji 's statement surprised Hikaru a bit. But then again, he surmised that he had absorbed quite a bit of Sai's Go throughout their years of teaching and playing. And *seiji* definitely was good enough to recognize different playing styles, even if they were muddled by a teacher-student relationship.

-Yes.- There was no reason to hide it. *sai* had become a Go icon, but nobody knew anything about *sai* 's real identity. And nobody was going to guess anything close to reality. *-Was that the reason you waited so long at hand 137?-*

-sai is better than you.-

-Yes.- It hurt, but it was the truth.

-I want to play sai.-

Hikaru sighed. He hoped *seiji* hadn't only played him in the hopes that Hikaru would set up a match between the two of them. If so, *seiji* was going to be sorely disappointed.

-So do I. But you're almost eight years too late for that. sai died in 2006, about three months before our first game.-

-My condolences. You haven't participated in any amateur tournaments.-

What the...? Keeping up with *seiji* 's way of jumping to seemingly unrelated topics was as hard as trying to keep up with that very same characteristic in his Go. What was *seiji* trying to say? That Hikaru was good enough and should go, or was he trying to find out who Hikaru was?

-No.-

-There is no Japanese pro with your style.-

Did *seiji* really think that Hikaru was a pro? Was that guy for real?

-Of course there isn't.-

-Because you are in another country?-

Slowly, Hikaru began to get angry despite *seiji* 's surreal allusions to him being a pro. He liked playing *seiji* well enough, but talking - well, *seiji* somehow managed to rub Hikaru the wrong way. He typed back his response with a good amount of venom.

-Some people actually are what they claim to be. With the way you play, it's a small miracle it's not common knowledge who you are.-

Well, that statement was true - to a degree. There were several discussion boards that strongly linked *seiji* with Ogata ex-Kisei, but so far, nobody had been able to really prove it. Everybody who could apparently had remained silent, and the others just worked on hunches.

seiji 's answer came after a small pause.

-You know.-

-Since our bloody first game. You were too good. If you don't want everyone to know, you should think of a better disguise.-

That reaction probably would get Hikaru a few PM's about who *seiji* really was. There were enough people watching their after-game chat to have at least one or two curious ones who wanted to know. Most of their observers were European or American because of the time, but surely there were a few amongst them that spoke Japanese. So far, he had managed not to say anything directly. If *seiji* pestered him further though...

Well, on the other hand, Ogata had just more or less confirmed that it really was him Hikaru had been playing with so far. To be honest, Hikaru was a lot more comfortable of thinking of Ogata ex-Kisei as *seiji*. To think that he'd been playing a titleholder the entire time... He had promised himself that he would never be one of those star-struck fans who almost stalked the pros. Hell, all of Igo Ramen's policies were against that. And he'd never had any problems talking to members of the New Wave or other pros who occasionally visited Igo Ramen. He hadn't even had any problem showing them some of his tsumego.

But somehow, this situation with Ogata ex-Kisei felt different. And Hikaru didn't really want to think about it because that would mean he had to acknowledge he was coming closer to beating a high-ranked pro, and that in turn would mean that he should start questioning once again why he didn't turn pro, too. Instead, he read *seiji*'s reply.

-I never actively tried to disguise myself. I didn't see any need for that.-

Hikaru's temper was starting to boil. Now that was pure arrogance in person. - You 'didn't see any need for that'? There are enough kifu out there that it's a wonder nobody has caught on yet. Just what kind of idiots do you think are playing NetGo? One word: sai.-

-Why should I mind my identity being known to those good enough to find out? seiji does its work in keeping the others away.-

-... obviously you've never heard about the small things in life, like gossip and such. You're lucky everyone has kept their mouths shut so far.-

-The next World Amateur Go Championship is being held in Tokyo in a month.-

Hikaru raised an eyebrow at that non-sequitur. That was a rapid change of topics - was *seiji* actually becoming uncomfortable with that line of discussion, or was that another one of his tactics to disguise his true intent? As insulting as the man could be with only a few words, as brilliant he could, Hikaru had to acknowledge. Somehow, those few conversations they had held over the years reminded him more of Go games than of simple communication. Everything was significant, not only what was said. *seiji* challenging to this game had to be the most prominent of it all.

-So what?- That didn't mean though he wasn't still cross with the man.

-If you aren't there, you should watch a few matches of the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean contestants. I think you will be surprised at the level of play there.-

-Again, so what? I know they're darned good.-

-You aren't aware of your own strength compared to theirs.-

Huh. What exactly was Ogata trying to say? That Hikaru was better or worse than them? *-I have played against both Zhang Suyang, the Chinese competitor, and Arawaki Hideo, the Japanese one, in online matches. I might be able to hold my own against them in front of a computer, but not in real life. Don't tell me you play with everything you have online.-*

-No, I don't. But do you? Can you give your best when facing a machine at 4:30 in the morning with barely an hour of thinking time?-

With that cryptic comment, *seiji* logged out. Just like the guy, pose a question like that and then leave before anyone could react. Not that Hikaru would have been able to, being too surprised at how many chords that deceptively simple question strung.

Hikaru remained staring at the screen, looking blankly at the statement. He didn't read the buzz of comments from other players who had watched the game and their subsequent chat.

Could he give his best when facing a machine?

Sai hadn't been content playing on the 'Net only. But Hikaru had been certain that that had been just a side-effect of being raised in a completely different time period, one without computers and such.

Now though... Now, he wasn't so sure anymore.

"Ne, Hikaru?"

Hikaru looked up from his homework with a small frown. "What is it?"

Sai was fidgeting a little. "Are we going to play with the magic box again tonight?"

Yeah. I promised you a game a day, and I'm going to stick to my promise. Don't worry, I'll be done with my homework soon enough for at least one game, two if you're quick. He rolled his eyes, very well-used to the ghost's obsession with Go by now.

He had even come to a grudging understanding with Sai, mostly out of self-defense. After nearly three months, none of his research into exorcism had turned up anything useful, and he had searched almost everywhere. Churches, shrines, libraries, internet, anywhere he could think of. Nothing. He was probably stuck with the ghost for the rest of his life, and Hikaru was starting to learn how to keep him content enough that the overflow of feelings didn't disrupt Hikaru's daily routine.

Somehow though, Sai didn't look as happy as he would have liked. So he huffed. *What is it?*

The ghost wrung his hands, looking anywhere but Hikaru. Finally, he answered. "Playing the people in the magic box is very nice. But I miss playing real people."

Hikaru frowned. *You know I don't want to get myself mixed up with you. And my reputation will be shot three ways to hell if someone sees me with some old geezers, playing Go of all things.*

"Can't I even play you?" Hikaru suddenly found himself at the receiving end of a very intense stare from Sai.

What!? he almost screamed. Sai was holding his ears. *Why the heck would I want to play you? I don't like Go!*

"But, Hikaru, I'd really, really like to play with someone again!" Sai started wheedling.

Homework forgotten for the moment, Hikaru faced the ghost fully. *Just what is so important about playing real people?*

Sai whirled his arms. "The people! The aura! The meeting of minds not just on the board, but also across it! The emotions! That's not something your box can do. And I miss the feeling of stones in my hand..."

Well, there's nothing I can do about the stones.

"But you can play with me."

Hikaru really, really didn't want to play against Sai. Sai was so much better than him that it wasn't even funny. And to top it off, Hikaru had never even played a game before, only watching Sai play and listening to his explanation. *I don't have a board.*

"I don't mind playing against you with the help of the magic box," Sai smiled hopefully.

Groaning, Hikaru slapped his head. *First, you don't want to play on the computer anymore, then you want to play again. Do you even know what you want?*

"I want to play you," Sai nodded emphatically, "because I want to play a real person. It would be even better if we had a real goban, but I don't mind using the magic box as long as I get to play you."

I'm no good.

A seraphic smile lit up the ghost's features. "And you think I was born with all that knowledge already in my head?"

I don't think you can even remember not knowing anything about Go. Old people start forgetting things, after all, and you've crossed the 'old age' barrier like centuries ago.

Sai pouted. "That wasn't very nice. I promise I will go easy on you."

Hikaru had to snort. *Your definition of 'easy' is what the rest of the world calls 'insane'.*

"I'll teach you!"

Rolling his eyes, Hikaru had to laugh. *You never give up, do you?*

"Nope!" Sai's eyes turned into upside-down U's, he smiled so hard. "So, Hikaru, are you going to play with me?"

The eye-roll turned into a huge sigh. *Fine, fine, cut it out already! You won, I'm going to play, and I would be really, really happy if you stopped pestering me right now because I want to get done with my homework because I like that even less.*

Two hours later (which consisted of 1.5 hours of homework, 10 minutes of dinner, and 20 minutes of Go), Hikaru stared at the screen, completely frustrated. *You said you were going easy on me! You call that easy!?*

Half of the ghost's face was hidden behind his ever-present fan, making his expression somewhat unreadable. "I *thought* I was going easy on you, but that must have been all that old age catching up with me."

Hikaru didn't deign to respond to that. He merely stared at the mess of stones on the virtual board, wondering just how in the world Sai could call that going easy on him. That hadn't even been a slaughter. That had been... eh, what came after slaughter? Genocide? A loss-in-three-moves?

Apparently he looked dejected enough that Sai took pity on him. "You know, for a beginner, that wasn't bad at all. You didn't make any real mistakes until about twenty hands or so in."

I didn't? Hikaru snorted. *Then what do you call this?*

He pointed to an intersection on the right side, where he had placed one of his first stones to try and gain some influence there. Sai had elegantly cut it off from Hikaru's power base in the lower right and even used it to infiltrate and ultimately take over that territory. It had taken all of Hikaru's efforts to create at least a single living shape there, which had cost him several other battles across the board.

Sai smiled at him. "That wasn't such a bad move. It was your answer to my attack that cost you all those stones. See, you attached here, which gave me the option to surround your stone and take it out."

Hikaru shook his head in confusion, trying to follow Sai's explanations. They were made exceptionally more confusing as most of the stones they were talking about had been removed from the board many hands ago. *Stop, stop, stop. There's too many stones on the board, I can't think like that. Let me save this real quick, and then do it again on a new board.*

Several clicks later, they had a fresh, new goban, where Hikaru quickly placed the stones until they came to the hand they had been

talking about. *So, you said, I shouldn't attach here. But what else was I supposed to do? I can't just let you keep cutting me off.*

He looked up to Sai in askance. The ghost wore a very peculiar expression, looking from Hikaru to the board and back to Hikaru. "Ne, Hikaru, can you remember how the rest of the game went?"

He shrugged. *Not sure. The next moves, yes, but I don't think I can remember all of them. Why?*

"Go on, recreate the game." Sai's face didn't give anything away.

With a raised eyebrow, Hikaru did as Sai had asked. Ten more stones, and he began having trouble remembering where exactly the next one went. To his surprise, he had more trouble remembering where he had placed his own stones, rather than where Sai had placed his. Finally, seventeen hands down the line, he gave up. *Mou, I can't really remember if I went there or the one above it.*

"Neither. You went to the right." Was that glee in Sai's voice?

Huh... Hikaru huffed. *Why would I do that? Makes no sense. And why was Sai laughing?*

"And that is exactly the reason why you've got trouble remembering your moves. You did most of them without really thinking about the whole board. You only focused on small areas and planned for them, but you didn't see them in context. Now that you can't remember all of your individual strategies anymore, you see things that you overlooked earlier, and which made some of your moves... less than ideal."

Slowly, Hikaru was getting annoyed with Sai's high-handedness. He knew that he had made mistakes, but there was no reason to rub it in. *Alright, alright, I got it. I'm a bloody n00b, not that I already knew that. Are you done with your playing-real-people thing? I've been done for the last twenty minutes.*

Sai smiled knowingly, which only served to further inflame Hikaru's irritation. "Oh, I don't think a beginner would have seen this mistake, let alone be able to recreate almost forty hands of a game he had just played. Why don't you watch the next game and try to find the mistakes there?"

Huh? Sai was actually complimenting him? On his Go skills, nonetheless?

As fast as his ire had been raised, as quickly Hikaru found himself placated again. It was next to impossible to stay mad at the ghost when he was singing Hikaru's praise. That didn't mean though that he was going to go along with such obvious manipulation.

Like finding mistakes's gonna help me. Seeing them's nothing like trying not to make them.

Almost on automatic, Hikaru activated the connection to the NetGo server and randomly challenged a reasonably high-ranked player. The player accepted his terms, and after the standard greeting Hikaru turned towards Sai. *Well?* he asked impatiently, definitely not wanting to go back to that mess he had made out of the board earlier.

Sai merely smiled enigmatically. "4-3 Kumoku."

And the game began.

(1) reading depth as well as width: Reading ahead in Go can be measured by two dimensions: depth - how far you can see (how many hands in advance you can predict) and width - how much you can see (how many possibilities you are able to explore at the same time in order to evaluate them for the best one). It is necessary to have a good combination of both - it does no good if you use up all your time following a trail to its logical conclusion 30 hands down the line when your opponent walks another one that you have failed to consider.

A/N:

This is to clear up the four questions I have been asked the most.

The game Touya Meijin - Sai: No, this game has never happened and will never happen in my story. For one, it is the reason Sai leaves (although I believe this reason to be slightly different from most interpretations) and I need Sai to stay much longer. For another, Hikaru is not a pro, has never met Akira let alone his father, and only knows of the man in passing like he would know of any other title-holder. There is absolutely no reason for Hikaru to walk up to Touya Meijin and demand a game. Sorry to disappoint any hopes.

On the issue of Touya Akira not being as strong without Hikaru's rivalry to spur him on: I believe that Akira has never known any other attitude towards Go than to study very, very hard and fulfill or even surpass the expectations of him. In the manga, Hikaru brought passion into that process, but that doesn't mean Akira wouldn't have become an excellent player on his own. Akira has one heck of a work-mentality, and there's enough attention on him due to being Touya Meijin's son that this will either make or break him. I assumed that Akira is strong enough to live up to those expectations - only after his parents die does he break down. By then, he already is a title-holder, and during that 14month hiatus he takes from the Go world he finds a new purpose in Go. More on that in a later chapter. To sum it up: this Touya Akira is different from the manga's Touya Akira, and naturally his strength is different. However, I mean 'different' not as in 'different quantity or quality', but as in 'being expressed in another way'. You can draw your own conclusions on what that means for Touya's character, too.

Hikaru's true skill-level: This chapter probably answered quite a bit. How accurate this measure against *seiji* is, I don't know. As *seiji* said - did *seiji* give it his all at 4:30 in the morning? Was Hikaru able to? Since Hikaru plays almost exclusively on the Internet, he can only be measured against other amateurs, and amongst them, he definitely is one of the best and has been for several years.

Now, for the tsumego giving hints to Hikaru's real strength: I believe that being strong at creating / solving tsumego takes a slightly different kind of strength than actually playing Go. I let Hikaru express some of those differences in the last chapter, but basically solving tsumego is dealing with a small excerpt from a larger board. Being able to deal with that doesn't necessarily mean being able to deal with the whole board. Just like in Martial Arts, knowing kata (individual moves strung together to ritualized sequences) doesn't necessarily mean knowing how to fight. On the other hand, knowing how to fight doesn't necessarily mean knowing kata. I think this can account for enough of a difference to make everyone think Hikaru's merely a very good amateur.

I hope that cleared up those questions, and I'm always looking forward to someone pointing out flaws in my logic.

Sakiku

Chapter 5

A/N: Thanks to Amarthame for her great work!

Chapter 4

It had been two weeks since the game with *seiji*, and Hikaru was still thinking about *seiji* 's comment. Was he really satisfied with keeping a computer between himself and his opponent?

For long years, he had thought that, yes, if one played seriously, only the game mattered. Nothing else. But now he was starting to doubt himself. He was beginning to see Sai's point of view, that the game was not only restricted to the board, but that the people sitting behind it were also an intrinsic part. That they influenced the game solely by being there. And that there were discussions to be held that just couldn't flow smoothly with a computer as an interface.

For the first time, he didn't know anymore whether his decision to keep his Go anonymous had been the right one. The only time he played real people was on his occasional visits to a Go salon, and there he rather played games of Shidou Go. He very much liked the look on people's faces when they began to understand what he was trying to show them. And he liked teaching a lot better than winning against inferior opponents.

But he had never thought about looking for real opponents to hone his skill against.

He didn't know whether that need for secrecy was an after-effect of Sai. All throughout his childhood, he had spent his time making sure there was no way anyone could connect him with the NetGo Saint *sai* . He had done that first by denying his knowledge of Go, and then by never playing a serious game in public. And every time he

had played offline, he had feared unconsciously that Sai would take over in his hunger to have a real game.

But Sai had been gone for seven years now. Did he really need to hide himself so much anymore?

seiji had mentioned the World Amateur Go Championship in two weeks. Hikaru still didn't know what exactly *seiji* had been trying to tell him, but he'd bet everything he had that it was related to Hikaru leaving his anonymity behind.

Well, he could take part in amateur tournaments, no problem. And, just like on the internet, the best of the amateurs were pretty darn good, as the amateur championships proved every year.

On the other hand, would that be so different from staying on the internet? If he wanted to have 95 percent of all players beneath his skill-level, he didn't have to look as far as real-life amateur tournaments. There were enough online tournaments organized by the various Go servers. And sometimes, preliminaries of important amateur tournaments were held online. He had even gotten a message from NetGo whether he wanted to compete for a spot in the Tokyo City Championship.

He had refused it half a year ago, and he didn't think he wanted to participate now. Somehow, he didn't think it was worth it when he already knew he'd start out in the top five or ten percent. Hikaru didn't know where that attitude came from, but he thought that it was a remnant of the time he had spent playing against Sai - he had started at the very bottom and had worked uphill for as long as Sai had been with him (well, as soon as he had gotten around to admitting that he actually liked Go and wanted to play it for his own reasons instead of satisfying Sai's needs. That in itself had taken nearly three years). It just wasn't worth it if there was nobody he could truly fight against.

The only other option besides amateur championships was the Pro-exam, which he could take until his thirtieth birthday.

But becoming Pro? He was old, almost 25. He knew he was good, but he just didn't think he could compete with the learning curve of brats ten or fifteen years his junior. During those years, kids just seemed to... internalize things in ways that hours of studying later on couldn't do. They virtually got better over night because most of the things they learned went straight to their instincts. And they were still children enough to act on those instincts without overthinking things.

In a game of war, like Go had originally been, being able to evaluate and judge things on instinct was a great advantage. There was just no time to consciously consider single stone. Standard situations had to be recognized in one glance, together with all possible standard responses both parties could make. Typical moves had to become instinct to free the brain for the battle of wits that was the true meaning of Go, the one move the opponent hadn't seen. A continuous effort to dissect and circumvent the opponent's strategy without giving them any lee-way to do the same to one's own.

Yes, he knew he had the talent, and he knew he had a very solid base to work from. But the closer one got to the top, the harder one had to work for the next step. And he didn't know whether he had the time to do all that work. After all, he liked his Igo-Ramen, and he'd never give it up. He already had one full-time job, and he didn't really want a second one.

But, still, the opportunity to meet his customers of Igo-Ramen at the times they became more than just people, and to play them at their level... The mere thought of trying to match his wits with the prodigies of the New Wave stole his breath.

The mere thought of playing *seiji* for real - well, that was a different kettle of fish. The way he had used *seiji* as a measuring stone for the past seven years almost reminded him of his relationship with Sai. During those six years he'd had with the ghost, they had played again and again, and although Hikaru had never really won, he had always been delighted when Sai had given him a stone less of handicap. Just like he had delighted in losing to *seiji* by less and less. Did he really want to end the illusion of playing against just

another Go fanatic now? Or was he afraid that, one day, he would actually reach the skill-level of the person behind *seiji* and then be left with nothing to strive for anymore?

And just why, whenever he thought about Go, did all answers lead back to Sai? Sai and his Hand of God?

Shaking his head irritably, Hikaru decided that worrying about such things while lazing around in bed all day really wasn't his thing. Sure, it was the one day of the week that Igo-Ramen was closed, but that didn't mean he was the type of person to spend it wallowing in his bed. He had a date with Kaiou Middle School, after all.

Last week, Kenichirou-kun had shyly given him a flyer of the Tokyo Middle School Go Championship and said that he was third board of Onigawa's guy's team. Hikaru had taken it as his way of asking whether he wanted to come.

Takamura Kenichirou and his parents were somewhat regular customers at Igo-Ramen, coming by at least twice a month - Kenichirou-kun more often if he had saved up enough money from his allowance. It had been the Go Special that had introduced Kenichirou-kun to the fun Go could be a year ago, and ever since he had joined Onigawa's Go club, the little tyke sometimes showed Hikaru games he was especially proud of. And when there was a momentary lull in Igo Ramen's business, Hikaru'd sometimes give him a few pointers on how to improve on those games. Nothing formal like in a student-teacher relationship, more like advice between friends.

And apparently, Kenichirou-kun thought him to be a good enough friend to invite him to his school tournament. It might have something to do with neither Takamura-san nor his wife being knowledgeable in Go, but Hikaru still felt honored. And because Haze, Hikaru's former Middle School, was represented at the championship, too, he almost felt obligated to attend. Even if it only was to see whether their Go club had expanded from the three members it had started out with.

Leaving his apartment to head for the nearest subway station, he reminisced about his own school time.

All throughout Middle School, he had been too stubborn to admit that he had actually begun to like Go. It had been Akari, his childhood friend, who had joined the school's Go Club and tried to make Hikaru come with her. Hikaru didn't really remember why she had joined, he thought it was because the club leader was either cute or a pity case or something, and Hikaru had laughed at her. Hikaru had joined the Soccer Club and had done his best to become a soccer pro. Of course, Sai hadn't been very happy with his continued disinterest in Go, but the ghost had kept his word that the days belonged to Hikaru, and only the evenings were spent on the computer playing Go, either against each other or over the internet.

Hikaru was still a bit astonished that this strange arrangement had been stable enough to last for years, although Sai had attempted every now and then to get Hikaru to play more Go (and, by proxy, let Sai play more real opponents).

There was one memorable time towards the end of seventh grade (more than a year after Sai's first appearance), when Sai had told him that he had a lot of talent for Go, and that he could still catch up to Touya Akira who had just had his first Shodan match at that time. Hikaru, who had been brooding over another lost game against Sai, had snarked back that he didn't know Touya from Adam and that Sai was just trying to use him to get better players. And that in the very improbable case that Hikaru ever decided to go professional, he'd only do it to play those people himself, not as Sai's avatar. And anyway, he was not going to risk being sent to psych-ward for having a split Go-personality, or whatever else they would diagnose Sai as. As things stood, Sai would have to make do with kifu of important players, TV records of official matches, his internet games in the evening, and those games against Hikaru every once in a while. End of discussion.

They had kept up this status quo throughout Middle School, with the only interruptions consisting of no computer access whenever

Hikaru's parents felt his schoolwork was slipping. No computer meant no Go for Sai, which in turn meant a Sai that was so unhappy and anxious to see Hikaru do better in school that Hikaru'd practically had no choice but study.

To be honest, sometimes Hikaru thought that this was the only reason he had ever finished Middle School (Elementary School, too, now that he thought of it...).

Smiling to himself, Hikaru felt that the train ride passed in almost no time. Not knowing where exactly Kaiou Middle School was located, it took some time to find the building. It took even more time to find the tournament itself, making him a bit more than fashionably late.

When he quietly entered the gym, only a referee and two of the club coaches watching over their pupils took notice of him. A coach that was standing next to a board close to the doors, sent him an especially dark glare.

From the looks of it, he had arrived in the middle of the first round. The scoreboard was still blank, all eight teams were still battling it out, and he could spot several games that hadn't moved into Middle Game yet. It was a strange atmosphere, everyone so disciplined and concentrated, something one usually didn't expect of a group of teenagers. Nothing broke the silence except for the irregular 'clack' whenever a player pressed the button of his clock. Some of the children shifted on their chairs anxiously, adding the soft rustle of cloth to the mix. Others, those who hadn't made it into the competing teams, were slowly walking around to observe different boards. And one boy seemed to have caught a cold because there was the occasional snuffle and cough.

But although there were plenty of coaches, players, additional team members, and referees; Hikaru couldn't see any parents, regular students, or fan-club members. Raising an eyebrow, he wondered whether he was allowed in there at all, or whether Kenichirou-kun had conveniently forgotten to mention that part.

He must have looked suitably lost, because the overseer manning the scoreboard got up, caught his eye, and quietly walked in his direction. Not wanting to disturb the students, Hikaru gestured towards the door he had just entered from, and the overseer nodded. The other man, who seemed to be somewhere in his fifties and was slightly overweight, joined him outside and closed the door behind him.

"Can I help you, Sir?"

Hikaru smiled slightly embarrassed and scratched his neck. "Eh, well, I know one of the players in there, and he wanted to show me his Go. But I think he forgot to mention that this tournament is for school members only, isn't it?"

The man smiled kindly, if not a bit condescending. "I fear that you are correct, Sir. I'm very sorry, but this championship was designed to promote team spirit and student interaction. It is a school event where only students and teachers may attend. I don't want to imagine what kind of chaos would be in there if every student brought relatives, friends, younger siblings, and other groupies..."

"Ah," Hikaru chuckled sympathetically. "Neither would I. I really don't like playing when it's too noisy."

Hikaru knew what he was talking about. About a year ago, the sidewalk in front of Igo-Ramen had gotten a new finish. During those two weeks while the workers had removed the old tarmac, he hadn't played a single game during the day. Trying to concentrate while a jackhammer was removing the upper layer of asphalt right next to your window was not a very fun thing to do.

"You play?" The overseer asked, warming up to Hikaru's friendly and outgoing nature.

"Only occasionally, as a hobby. Mostly on the Net. Well, I'll leave you to your job then. Can you tell me when it's supposed to be over? Maybe I can catch him afterwards."

"That might be a bit of a problem. Since this is a school event, the students are only dismissed when they are back at their own school. Measures to prevent getting one of the kids lost because they don't know their way around Tokyo."

Hikaru grimaced. "Oh, yes, completely forgot about that. I remember, we had one very memorable trip to the science museum in eighth grade. Took our teacher about two hours to realize that the two she was looking for were already back home... Ah, can I at least leave a message for Kenichirou-kun for when he's done with his games today?"

"Certainly. Which team does he play for?"

Hikaru fished for the small kifu block he had taken to always carrying around with him. "Onigawa, third board from what he told me last week. Takamura Kenichirou. Hang on a second..."

He quickly sketched four corner problems on the top-most sheet of the kifu block, one for each corner of the 19 x 19 grid, scribbled 'Solve to get 1 Go-Special' across its back, and tore it out of the block together with a second, clear sheet. Across the back of the second sheet, he wrote 'Your Best Game Today', and handed both papers over to the bemused overseer.

"Here you go. But please only give it to him after he's done with all his games for today, because I don't want him distracted by the tsumego. Thank you very much."

The man grinned. "Sure. Takamura Kenichirou, third board for Onigawa. Should be able to remember that long enough to hand it over to his coach."

"Thanks. Again, sorry for interrupting you."

"No problem."

With a wave, Hikaru left for the exit. That had been rather shorter than he had expected. Hmmm. What to do with the rest of his day off?

"Hikaru-kun, could you please come to the kitchen? Your father and I would like to talk to you."

A bit confused, Hikaru and Sai looked at each other. Hikaru had switched on the TV and had pretended to watch the summary of this year's Hon'inbou league (1). Sai had been considerably more excited about it. "Sure, mom," he called out to her. *Have fun with the league*, he added for Sai's benefit.

Leaving the TV on so that Sai could keep watching, he went into the kitchen, where both his parents were staring at him with incredibly serious looks. He almost went right out of the room again, not really wanting to figure out what they were going to harangue on him now.

"What's the matter?" he asked reluctantly.

His father, who had come home for once (which was a bad sign because he only was there for very, very serious discussions), cleared his throat. "Son, you are almost done with eighth grade. There is only one more grade of Middle School left before the entrance exams for High School. You should start spending less time on the computer or at soccer, and instead work on improving your grades so that you can get into a good school."

For a moment, Hikaru was left speechless. Cutting down on both his computer time and soccer practices? What had he done to them? Then he recovered enough to shout with his usual volume. "What!?! You can't be serious! There's still a whole year left!"

"Yes," his mother interjected calmly, "and a year is not much. You are at Haze, a school whose standards are not very high, and you still barely pass. There is much to do if you want to think about going to Mizusawa or Chienkan. Your father and I, we have saved enough

money that you don't have to worry about that, but in return, we want you to give your best effort."

He looked from his mother to his father and back again, seeing that they were dead serious. "You gotta be joking! When I'm done with Middle School, no one can force me to go to High School. I don't want to!"

"Well, what do you want to do then? You can't just keep living with us forever," his father frowned. "And what kind of future employment do you think you will find without a High School diploma?"

"I want to become a soccer pro!"

His parents exchanged a glance that Hikaru knew only all too well. And, as expected, his mother looked at him like she was trying to tell him his dog had died - the pitying way parents always looked at their children when explaining to them that the real world just didn't work like that.

"Hikaru, do you know that less than one percent of all aspiring soccer professionals actually become what they dream of? We know that you're good at soccer, but 'good' isn't good enough. You have to be outstanding to manage the jump into professional leagues. Now, I don't want to say that you aren't strong-willed enough to become outstanding, but you need to have something else in case you don't make it. We both would like you to go to Mizusawa; it's a respectable school not too far from here that gives you a good head-start both if you get a job or if you decide later on that you want to go to college, after all."

Hikaru fumed. He hated it when his parents became like that. "But I don't want to go to High School! I'll need that time to train so that I can become a soccer pro!"

His parents glanced at each other, and their expression told nothing good. Finally, his father turned back to him with his resolved-face. Hikaru knew he wasn't going to like what his father had to say.

"Hikaru, this merely shows that you are still thinking like a child. And children aren't ready yet to make good decisions for the rest of their lives. That is what parents are for, and until you prove to us you aren't a child anymore, you are going to do what we tell you to. Understood?"

"But - "

"No, Hikaru!" He could see that his father was starting to get angry. "You will go to High School, and that's it! If you are one of the very few who manage the jump to a soccer career, that's good for you, but we cannot allow you to let that become the sole focus of your life. End of discussion!"

Hikaru felt tears threatening at the corner of his eye. He looked from his mother to his father, and both seemed to be quite resolved. They weren't going to listen to him anytime soon. That was so unfair! It was *his* life, after all, and so what if he didn't become a soccer pro? He'd surely find another job.

Gritting his teeth, he turned on his heels and stomped out of the kitchen, barely swallowing a childish 'I hate you.' That certainly wouldn't convince his parents that he was indeed ready to be an adult and make his own decisions.

Considerably disturbed, Hikaru made his way back to the living room, where Sai was still watching the commentary on the Hon'inbou league. For a while, Hikaru just stared blankly at the screen. Sai, finally realizing that he wasn't alone anymore, turned around. He immediately spotted that Hikaru was not in a good mood. "Hikaru? What's wrong?"

Everything. And that pretty much summed it up. He didn't even know what exactly he was feeling at the moment. *My parents want me to spend next year doing nothing but study, study, study, so that I can get into some stupid High School they think is best for me. And whenever I tell them that I won't need to go to High School because I'm going to be a Soccer Pro, they tell me that nobody knows*

whether I'll become one, and that I should have something to fall back on.

Sai smiled brightly. "You don't have to go to High School, Hikaru. If you don't become a Soccer Pro, you can always become a Go Pro."

Rolling his eyes, Hikaru decided that he should have known that this would be the answer when telling Sai of his problems. Go was the standard solution to everything. *How often do I have to tell you that I don't want to be a Go Pro*, he lamented. *And, anyway, good luck trying to convince my parents of that. They want to banish me from the computer so that I'll study more, and whenever I get home with a bad grade, they're probably gonna cut my allowance even more. That's so going to suck.*

For a moment, Sai looked at him pityingly. Then his pity turned into alarm. "Wait. They aren't going to allow you to play with the Magic Box again?"

Exactly. Finally the ghost was getting it. Took him long enough

Sai's eyes grew wide. "That... that means..."

Yep, you're right. No more Go, because I'm supposed to be studying.

"That - that is... cruel!" Whirling his arms frantically, Sai erupted into his own panic attack, which didn't help Hikaru very much. And then there was that ear-grating whine combined with the emotional over-spill. "Ne, Hikaru, can't you do anything?"

No, I can't! They want me to 'have a good job' later on, one that pays a lot of money, and for that, I've got to go to High School. A good High School. And good High Schools only take students with good grades, which means that I have to study more.

Sai slumped to the floor. "And if you have to study more, you can't play Go anymore..."

Yeah. They're probably gonna put me into cram school, too. Finally the ghost saw the whole picture.

"Cram school?"

A school after school where people only study, study, study for the exams. That's gonna be soooo boring. And that's gonna cost me even more time.

Sai shook his head sadly. "I've never seen a time where so many children are allowed to go to school, with so much technological advance that gives you so many freedoms to choose from. But the more I see, the more I realize that you aren't free either, are you? They are only superficial freedoms, ones that you can't actually make use of if you don't want to ruin your life..."

Hikaru looked at the ghost oddly. *Huh? What do you mean? Didn't understand a word you just said.*

He wondered what Sai was talking about, all that 'freedom' and 'technological advance' stuff was creeping him out. He had never heard Sai talk in such a... mature way, like he was about to become old and stuffy like the rest of the adults.

Suddenly, Sai turned towards Hikaru. "Ne, Hikaru, if you don't become a soccer pro, what do you want to be?"

Eh... Hikaru was stumped. What in the world was Sai planning now? I don't know. Never really thought about it. Some kind of employee?

"Well, why do you want to be a soccer player?"

That's easy. Playing soccer is fun!

"Is there anything else you like?"

Thoughtfully, Hikaru looked at the ceiling. *Let's see. I like hanging out with my friends, going to the arcade, playing computer games...* As a joke he added, *and ramen, of course!*

Sai nodded. "Aren't there people who make all this? Who make the magic boxes, who make the ramen?"

Sure, but for anything to do with computers, you've got to go to University. And University is even worse than High School. You've got to get through High School first, and then pass an even worse entrance exam for University. No thanks.

"And what about ramen?"

What about ramen? Hikaru looked at Sai oddly. Didn't the ghost get that he had only said that as fun?

"Do you also need to go to University to make ramen?"

Huh... Don't think so. And I don't think you've got to be good in High School to cook good ramen.

A slow smile spread across Sai's features. "Then why don't you find out? You could ask the owner of the ramen restaurant you visit so often."

Yeah, I could ask the old man at Mizuhara's. But why should I? The ghost couldn't seriously be considering getting Hikaru a ramen career, could he?

"That's simple. Your parents want you to have a good job, yes?" For once, Sai's eyes were gleaming excitedly about something other than Go. Hikaru wasn't sure yet whether that was a good sign or a bad one.

Yeah.

"And they want to be sure that, if you don't become a soccer pro, you won't be poor and hungry."

Yeah...

"So what if you suggest an alternative? What if you tell them you want to be a ramen chef, and tell them everything you have planned to do to become one?"

Hikaru graced Sai with disbelief. *You think that'll work?*

Sai smiled. "Your parents worry for you. But I am sure you can convince them if you are stubborn enough and show them that you really know what you are getting yourself into."

But I don't really know what I'm getting myself into, Hikaru huffed. *I don't even know if I've got to have a good High School degree to get a good job as ramen cook. And I really don't think my parents will go for that.*

"Why don't you find out?" Sai's smile spread across half his face. "Ask Mizuhara-san, and perhaps he can help you. And if it turns out your parents won't allow you to become one, you won't be any worse off than you are now. You don't have anything to lose, do you?"

For a while, Hikaru merely sat there. Sai's logic was strange, but he couldn't deny that there was something to what Sai was saying. He wasn't sure whether he really wanted to be a ramen cook for life, but it definitely sounded better than years upon years of school and studying. Well, Sai was right about one thing: the situation couldn't get any worse.

Slowly, Hikaru nodded. *Alright, I'll ask the old man tomorrow. Can't hurt to try.*

Sai's smile turned blinding, and he hugged Hikaru briefly. "That's right! Now, can I play you again tonight? I'll even give you a handicap of 11 stones! (2)"

What!?! Hikaru exploded. I almost beat you with 10 last week! There's no way you're giving me 11 stones! I bet I can play you at 9 now!

Well, he had barely held his own against Sai with the 10 stones from last week. But at least he had been able to push the game into end game before he'd had to give up. And that was when Sai had originally suggested 12 stones. The ghost was always suggesting at least 2 handicap stones too much.

It was nice to see that Sai thought he had gotten better, needing a stone less than last week. But there was no way in hell he was playing Sai at 11, when he had almost won against him with 10!

"Alright, alright," the ghost waved off. "If you really want to, you can play me at nine stones."

You better believe it!

Sulkily, Hikaru stomped out of the room. He still had homework to finish if he wanted to play Sai tonight.

(1) Hon'inbou league: The Hon'inbou tournament actually takes place over the course of three years (this means that there can be up to three different Honinbou tournaments at the same time). First, there are three preliminaries to decide who gets to participate in the league. The league is an eight player round robin to determine who gets to challenge the title holder (every year, the worst four of the league have to leave and be replaced by the winners of the prelims). And then, finally, the title match that is a best out of seven. Go to [senseis.xmp.net/? SchedulefortheSevenJapaneseBigTitles](http://senseis.xmp.net/?SchedulefortheSevenJapaneseBigTitles) if you want more detailed information.

(2) 11 handicap stones: Yes, it is possible to place more than nine handicap stones on the board, even though it isn't common. For the layout of those stones, look for it at Sensei's Library.

A/N:

Thank you very much everyone for your great reviews. I have to admit, I wasn't really sure whether my strange way of narrating this story was going to interest anyone, but apparently my worries were unfounded.

Oh, and the idea of Hikaru trying to become a soccer pro was stolen from Shiho Yuki's 'Go? But I'm a Soccer Player'. Next to Luce Red's 'Next to NetGo', this is the story that has influenced Hikaru no Ramen the most. I also might have gotten some inspiration from 'Watch and Learn' by esama and 'The Neverending Road' by Leitbur, but if I were to go into detail where exactly every single one of my ideas came from I'd have to list three quarters of the HnG-section. Without all the stories there, this one would never have come into existence. Thank you very much!

Sakiku

Chapter 6

A/N : Many thanks to Amarthame for her great work!

Chapter 5

Hikaru was wandering aimlessly through central Tokyo. He had a whole day off - well, more like afternoon - to fill after that little snag at Kaiou Middle School.

He strolled through Kitanomaru Park, watching how the last cherry blossoms were fading away at the end of April. Debating with himself whether he should go and visit the National Museum of Science and Nature or not, he decided that the weather was too nice to spend his time indoors. Instead, he kept ambling along the pathways, enjoying how everything was so fresh and green all around him.

Kitanomaru Park was not far from Igo Ramen and his home, only about three kilometers, with the Nihon Ki-in almost exactly in the middle. Whenever the weather was good, there were many people outside. There were groups of housewives learning Tai Chi or dancing with fans, although most of them came during the very early morning hours when it was still cool. Tokyo could get abominably hot and humid in the summers. Other people were reading, laughing, talking, and yes, playing chess, shougi, and Go.

There were a few corners set aside with special tables where boards were already engraved in the surface and the playing stones set in boxes to the side. In one especially memorable spot, there was a huge chess board tiled onto the ground, and the pieces were almost hip height. Whenever Hikaru walked by, there always were groups of older men playing, wandering over the chess board to carry the figures to other places, discussing, and generally having a good time.

Today, the board was almost covered by a thick layer of sakura petals, but that didn't stop the old men from playing. Whenever there were too many so that the color of the tile beneath couldn't be seen anymore, they were swiped aside by whoever happened to be closest and the game went on as usual.

Although Hikaru didn't know much about chess except for how the individual pieces moved, he stopped by for a while to watch the game. Well, game would be a bit of a misnomer, more like a team match. The old men were divided into two groups, with each group discussing their strategies loudly without caring about being overheard by the other team. It was funny to see such aged people arguing like little school children.

"Shindou-sensei?"

Hikaru looked up from the game to see who was calling him. One of the players was looking back at him, not quite sure whether he had identified Hikaru correctly. Hikaru didn't have much of a problem recognizing the man. The old, gnarled scar from his cheek to his chin was quite memorable. The man had gotten it from a bomb fragment during the second World War.

Hikaru smiled. "Hello, Kimihara-san. Please, do not let my presence disturb your game."

Kimihara-san was a more or less regular visitor of the Go-salon Heart of Stone. This was the only salon Hikaru had ever been to, and he quite enjoyed the teaching games he played there every now and then. He didn't visit regularly, but often enough to have been bestowed with the title of 'sensei', teacher. Nowadays, he didn't even have to pay his entrance fee anymore and was swamped with requests whenever he appeared.

Even all those years ago, when he had first come into the salon during his apprenticeship with Mizuhara-san, he had been the most skilled player and played the old men for fun and to teach them. Somehow, he had kept coming back even though Heart of Stone

was the kind of establishment he had despised at that time. Maybe that had been Kawai-san's fault, a taxi driver in his mid-forties who had taken an interest in Hikaru and his talent in Go. That interest had shown itself in an incessant need to challenge Hikaru to increasingly ridiculous games, like Hikaru playing blind Go against three club patrons at the same time and forcing them into ties.

Of course, Hikaru had never agreed to such insane suggestions unless he got something in return if he won - most of the time a ride in Kawai-san's taxi. The week after Sai's disappearance, Hikaru had even gotten Kawai-san to drive him to and from the airport so that he could fly to Hiroshima prefecture and visit Shuusaku's grave.

Three years ago, Kawai-san had died of a heart-attack. But by then, Hikaru had been coming to the Go salon because he liked the people there and liked playing teaching games with them. Kimihara-san was one of them. His Go wasn't bad, only second to Kawai's and the Owner's skills. But Hikaru hadn't anticipated the man also playing chess, which was why he was a bit surprised to see the Go player amongst those manning the black side of the board.

Exchanging a few quick words with his fellow players, Kimihara-san extracted himself from the men and headed straight towards Hikaru.

"Shindou-sensei! Of course you didn't disturb the game; it was getting over my head anyway. I understand even less of chess than I do of Go."

Hikaru raised an eyebrow. "Well, I'm sure you know more about chess than I do. And your Go is very good, if you remember to watch the whole board."

"But you are still better than me."

The old man said that so earnestly that Hikaru didn't quite know what to say. Both of them were aware that Hikaru played in a completely different league, but that wasn't something Hikaru ever would say outright. Sometime over the course of Sai's companionship, he had

learned some semblance of manners. He was very grateful to the ghost for that.

Kimihara-san laughed at him. "Maa, maa, I didn't want to embarrass you! Say, sensei, what brings you here? Finally got rid of your restaurant to make a living of Go?"

Drawing a face, Hikaru didn't know what it was lately with people wanting him to turn to Go full-time. "No, nothing like that. Today's the day Igo Ramen's closed, and since it's a nice day I decided to spend some time outdoors. Nothing to do with Go whatsoever."

"A pity." To Hikaru's horror, Kimihara-san *pouted* . "You know, Hikaru-sensei, if you became pro, the whole Heart of Stone club would be your number one fans, and we'd pay you lots and lots of money for teaching games."

"You can't be serious! You prefer to pay for something that you can get for free right now?" Hikaru was incredulous. Was everyone going insane?

Kimihara-san actually laughed at him. "Sure! Would be great if I could tell my grandchildren that I knew Shindou-pro personally. Maybe then they'll take Go more seriously."

Shaking his head, Hikaru had to laugh, too. "You have a lot of confidence in me, Kimihara-san. Even if I wanted to, I doubt I am good enough to get through the pro exam. After all, I'm too old to take the easier way through the insei league."

Now it was Kimihara's turn to stare at Hikaru incredulously. "Shindou-sensei, it's very nice that you're not arrogant and big-headed about your talent, but I think you're seriously underestimating yourself. From what both Kawai-san and the Owner have told me, you were at insei level the very first time you appeared at Heart of Stone. You can't tell me that you haven't gotten stronger in the meantime! Take heart, lad, everybody would really like to see you play to your full abilities. Don't think we haven't seen how you

sometimes look when playing the thousand and first game of shidou Go."

"But I like playing shidou Go!" Hikaru protested vehemently, trying to ignore the small seed of truth in Kimihara's words.

The old man merely smiled. "And I'd be the last one to tell you to give it up. But, sensei, you need to find someone to challenge you. Otherwise it will be quite an empty Go existence for you. Me, I have the other guys at the salon. But who do you have, hm?"

"There are many people on the Net who really are excellent."

"The net? Oh, you mean all those modern computers? Hah, my son decided I needed one for my 80th. Never touched it in my life, and I don't think I ever will. Nah, I think it is really pitiful having to play against some machine. It is as if the game isn't real then. I need to hear and feel the one I'm playing. But maybe I'm just old-fashioned."

With a pang of nostalgia, Hikaru remembered the many instances when Sai had complained in almost the same way. A ghost who had been dead for centuries actually had more in common with Kimihara-san that Hikaru did. Strange how he couldn't even imagine a time without computers and having NetGo.

"I don't think you're old-fashioned, Kimihara-san. I know plenty of people nowadays who prefer playing in person to playing on the Net, and before you say anything, they are only a bit older than me. It's just that I like Igo Ramen too much to give it up, and I'd have to do that if I became pro."

The old man snorted. "Sure you do. Ever heard of hiring help? An extra cook, something like that? It's a small miracle that you manage to make enough profit to live off it, with everything here being astronomically expensive. If you've got somebody else, you can open your restaurant longer and don't have to close for a day a week. That means enough money to pay your help, and you can take more time off. Sensei, sometimes I think you already have

contracted that estrangement from reality that most Go pro's have. Would be great if you could go all the way and get the good together with the bad you already have."

Hikaru couldn't help but laugh even though he felt slightly chastised. It couldn't be that easy, could it? "I'll think about it, Kimihara-san. Say, now that I've kept you from playing chess and even gotten so much helpful advice from you, would you like to play a game of Go with me? I think I can see that the board over there's free at the moment."

A gnarled old hand patting his shoulder was his reward. "You're a good lad. Do you mind if Nakamura-kun and Takagawa-kun come and watch? They go to a different salon."

"Sure," Hikaru shrugged. "The more the merrier. I'll be over there and make sure nobody takes the board before us, alright?"

Kimihara-san was all smiles when he nodded and hurried off to his friends as fast as his aging body allowed. It made Hikaru happy to bring such joy to people. And now that he had finally gotten over his phobia of people thinking he was a geek, he really didn't mind others seeing him play. He laughed. If someone had told him ten years ago that he'd actually enjoy playing an old geezer in front of many more old geezers in the middle of a public park, he'd have looked for the next psychiatric ward.

It seemed that nobody had played Go on the stone board in quite a while because Hikaru had to sweep a whole layer of discarded sakura petals off the table. Then again, now that the cherry trees were losing theirs en masse, it could take as little as half a minute to completely bury the board under an inch-thick layer.

When Kimihara-san finally arrived, he didn't only have his two friends with him but a whole slew of other people, mostly men over the age of sixty.

Hikaru raised an eyebrow towards Kimihara-san. "Which ones of them are Nakamura-san and Takagawa-san? I thought you only were getting your two friends?"

The old man didn't look abashed in the least, instead sporting a mirthful twinkle in his eyes. "Oh, when I told them that I was going to play someone who's as good as any pro, they insisted on coming."

Hikaru barely kept himself from banging his head against the stone table - repeatedly. With a terribly fake smile, he oozed pleasure from between gritted teeth. "You know, Kimihara-san, if it didn't damage my reputation even worse than losing to you right now, I'd gladly strangle you."

"I'm just trying to help you prepare for your matches as a pro. You'll have to play with many people watching then, too."

"But I never said I wanted to be a pro!" Hikaru protested. The crowd laughed, and Hikaru realized belatedly that the more he protested, the more they would expect from him. He frowned at Kimihara-san, who still looked utterly unrepentant. "You know, just for that I should let you win with a count of 30 moku."

The man waved him off. "Oh, pish, you'll do no such thing. Just play like you always do and ignore all those old fops who don't have anything better to do than watching people play Go. I'll even stop reminding you that this is something you'll have to get used to once you become a pro."

Hikaru threw his hands in the air. "You're incorrigible. I give up. Place five stones."

"Last time, I played you at four!"

Giving him the evil eye, Hikaru complained back. "I said I should let you win with a count of 30, didn't I? There's got to be somewhere those 30 moku come from, doesn't it?"

"Fine." Kimihara-san pouted as he placed the stones, but Hikaru could see the excitement beneath. "You're going down, Shindou-sensei!"

The crowd laughed, apparently entertained by their small squabble. Well, Hikaru guessed that it wasn't every day a comical duo like them appeared at the park. He wasn't really angry at Kimihara-san; it was just that the man had prodded at the very same thing Hikaru had been thinking over for the past two weeks. Hikaru swore that, one day, he'd begin to develop an allergy against the word 'pro'.

But for now, the game was more important.

He was quite confident that he could give Kimihara-san a good and even teaching game at a five-stone-handicap, but it would require considerably more work than at four stones. Contrary to what he had said, Hikaru didn't really intend to lose by 30 moku; he was rather going for a tie. That would satisfy both of them - Kimihara-san because he had come so close to victory (something of a sore spot for the old man), and himself for a bit of a challenge to arrange it without anyone catching on and still providing ample teaching opportunities.

The further the game progressed, the more Hikaru caught up on the gap those five stones at the beginning had created. Several times, he saw an opportunity to take a winning path, but since he wanted to create a tie, he subtly maneuvered Kimihara-san to block those paths so that they wouldn't become obvious and force Hikaru to take them later on.

In a small part of his brain, he kept taking in the reactions of the crowd surrounding them. They were just as concentrated on the game as them, and their numbers seemed to grow. Well, that was somewhat inevitable, seeing that a crowd of people always drew attention of even more people. But as long as they stayed quiet, Hikaru could blissfully ignore them, which he did with increasing fervor.

When no more moves were possible, Hikaru exhaled slowly. For the first time, the crowd was murmuring excitedly, not quite sure who had won. Together, Hikaru and Kimihara-san moved the stones to create easily countable rectangles. Hikaru didn't really need to count his, but did it for show nonetheless.

"Thirty-four. Thirty-seven with the three I captured."

Kimihara-san frowned piteously. "Thirty-five plus two. That's not fair, sensei! You were supposed to win!"

Hikaru smiled slightly. "Well, Kimihara-san, if you wanted me to win that badly, you should have placed only four stones. I told you there was no way I was becoming pro. Look here, at Hand 43, if you had done a great knight's move instead of a small one, you would have gained enough space to let this group live, and then you would have won."

With quick moves, Hikaru recreated the game up to the hand in question and began the after-game discussion that was the most valuable part of a teaching game. Even their audience participated, asking questions that ranged from utterly basic to quite complicated. It took almost an hour, and if Hikaru hadn't excused himself for an imaginary dinner appointment, he bet the discussion would have gone on indefinitely. Everybody thanked him profusely for the impromptu lesson and was reluctant to let him go.

Just as he had managed to extract himself from the masses, a vaguely familiar man fell in step with him. Hikaru really didn't want to answer any more questions, so he stayed silent. To his surprise, the man stayed silent for quite some time, too. Hikaru took that time to wrack his brain for where he could have seen the man before. He was moderately tanned and quite tall, somewhere in his thirties, a bit gangly, and walked with the energy of someone who did a lot of exercise. Nonetheless, he was dressed in a tux and elegant shoes, a businessman who had just come from his workplace.

"Why did you move to 12-16 at the 104th hand?"

Hikaru was startled out of his thoughts. He still didn't know where he had seen the man before, but he was quite sure he hadn't made his personal acquaintance.

"12-16?" He thought for a bit. Ah, yes, that had been one of the hands he had played to slowly guide Kimihara-san into blocking off one of the roads that would have forced Hikaru to become victorious. "If I hadn't played there, black wouldn't have played at 14-13, and sooner or later, white would have had to play there."

How much had the man seen? Because they were walking next to each other, Hikaru couldn't get a clear view of the other's eyes from the side. Hikaru was uncomfortable. It would be just his luck that this man had recognized the move for what it was.

The man nodded in acceptance. "And why would it have been detrimental for white to play there?"

Shit. Hikaru had a nagging feeling that he had seen the man in one of his Go Weekly magazines. If he could just remember where... "It would be bad because then White wouldn't achieve the 34 moku necessary to prevent a loss."

"Whose loss though..." The man let out a short bark of laughter. "You know, it would be a riot if a no-name like you appeared at the pro-exams this year. It's rare enough that outsiders pass, but it would be a real hoot to have an absolute nobody stomping over those highly decorated insei brats."

Hikaru smiled slightly, finally recognizing who the man was. Strangely enough something in the pro's down-to-earth manner set him more at ease than he had been all afternoon. "You passed the exam at the same age I am now, didn't you? Why did you decide to become pro so late? You definitely were good enough in your youth to pass."

Kadowaki Tatsuhiko 5-dan, repeated Student Meijin before passing the pro-exam on his first try at the ripe age of 26, snorted. "Didn't

have enough money to pay for insei classes, and my old man had no head for something he said was a pansy sport. Wanted me to follow in his footsteps, become a hotelier. Sent me to university, taught me everything I needed to know, and then I worked for him until I just about exploded with boredom. Then I took the exam, and you know the rest."

Kadowaki-san was refreshingly different from other pros and even made decent conversation. For the first time in the last two weeks, Hikaru didn't feel his hackles rise merely at the mention of the word 'pro'. Instead, he was genuinely curious and thought Kadowaki-san was informal enough to not mind his questions.

"What was it like when you finally became pro? You started at the same time as the New Wave began to pick up speed, but you never were one of them."

The man barked another laugh. "Definitely not something to be sad about. I really didn't want to be counted amongst brats about half my age. That's something you need to get used to, those precocious little pipsqueaks who are barely out of kindergarten but can whip out a Go that makes you eat their road-trail."

Not able to help himself, Hikaru had to chuckle. "Touya Kisei became Shodan just a year before you, didn't he (1)? Should I be glad that there's no second Touya in sight at the moment?"

"Depends on what you want to do. If you want to get attention, then yes. Even if you're better than most of your competitors, you won't be able to hold a candle against those once-in-a-lifetime-prodigies that leave you behind in the dust without even trying. But if you want to teach or make money or just play for the heck of it, things like that won't matter. Just be sure that you don't mind living Go practically 24/7. That's something where insei have an advantage. They already know how to study to get better, and they already have teachers they can go to for more tutoring. When you've become Shodan (2), you're once again at the bottom of the food-chain and few people will rip out an arm and a leg just to help you."

Hikaru had rarely heard such a frank account of life as a Go pro. Kadowaki-san certainly didn't seem to have a problem with telling the truth as he saw it.

Slowly, he nodded. "Thanks for the advice. I'll keep it in mind should it ever come to it."

The pro merely waved him off. "Sure, sure. I got to split off here, need to catch the bus to the Ki-in. Got to be there in ten minutes... Oh, well, wouldn't be the first time I'm late. Ah, and if you need someone to sponsor you for the exam, just tell them to take it up with me. See you!"

Jogging off through the northern gate of the garden, Kadowaki-san never even once looked back at Hikaru, merely lifting his hand in an informal good bye.

Hikaru shook his head. Fate seemed to have it in for him - first those constant reminders that he should become a pro, and then lots of help paving a way he didn't even want to go.

He was just glad that nobody had come yet and forcibly dragged him out of Igo Ramen.

"Hey, Sai?"

The ghost jumped away from where he had been trying to find out the inner workings of a mail box. Hikaru had long ago become used to the ghost sticking his head into various objects in a vain attempt to have a look at their insides.

Sai hurried after Hikaru, who was slowly making his way from the high school he hadn't been able to escape after all, to Mizuhara's ramen restaurant, where he was apprenticing as a cook.

"What is it, Hikaru?"

Hikaru sighed, for once talking aloud to the ghost instead of silently in his head. "You think I did the right thing?"

He got some strange looks but as he had earphones on, most people assumed he was talking to someone on his cell phone.

Dancing around Hikaru, the ghost frowned. "Which right thing?"

Hikaru's sigh deepened. "Everything. Becoming a ramen chef. Going to a trade school. Giving up soccer."

"Why do you ask?" For once the ghost turned his exuberance more serious. "Do you have doubts as to your chosen path?"

"Yes... No... I don't know. You know, I thought I could get out of high school by becoming a ramen chef, but now it turns out that, next to the apprenticeship, I've still got to go to trade school, and I've got to work. I don't even have enough time anymore to meet my friends."

Sai smiled slightly. "Mizuhara-san told you so when you asked him two years ago. That you had to take business and home-economics classes in addition to the apprenticeship. At least you don't have to do all the regular high school classes."

Hikaru snorted. "At least I would be less busy then. I can't remember the last time I had enough time to go to the arcade..."

Sai smiled slightly. "Then why don't you go tonight after work?"

Hikaru huffed and shook his head slightly. "Going alone's booooring. And, anyways, if I go now I won't be able to play for you tonight 'cause Mom's sure going to ground me for going without her permission."

With a long look at the dejected boy, Sai finally sighed. "Hikaru. I don't mind postponing our game. Most days, you let me play more than one, anyway. Why don't you just take the evening off and invite some of your friends to the arcade?"

Hikaru didn't quite know what to think or say. He opened and closed his mouth several times, but he never quite found the right words. Finally, he just shook his head. "Nah. Too little time. But I'll think about calling Ayase-kun for the weekend."

He really didn't know why he had said that. Two years ago, he would have jumped at a chance to get out of playing Go for one evening. Now though... he didn't want to say that he was looking forward to it, but he really liked watching how Sai turned so completely serious and focused when faced with a goban. And he really liked trying to anticipate Sai's next hand, and how Sai's opponent would react to it.

And, last but not least, he really liked those occasional games Sai would goad him into. Not that he would tell Sai that, of course. Hikaru had a reputation to maintain after all, and he couldn't give in without a struggle. But it was something only he shared with the ghost.

Over the past few years, Sai had somehow grown to be the biggest part of his life. Since none of his exorcism plans had turned out fruitful, Hikaru had grudgingly arranged himself with the presence of the ghost. And since there was no Sai without Go, Hikaru had even more grudgingly integrated it into his life. And when he hadn't looked, he had somehow come to like it. Not that he ever would tell Sai so, of course.

Two hours later, he found himself cleaning the kitchen area of Mizuhara's, when the old man interrupted him.

"Shindou-kun! Takeout for Heart of Stone!"

Hikaru looked up from where he was scrubbing the counter. Mizuhara-sensei held up a large plastic bag with several ramen bowls. Nodding, Hikaru washed his hands and took the bag. Mizuhara-sensei had made it a habit to deliver takeout to customers that were within walking distance, and ever since Hikaru had started his apprenticeship, that task fell to him.

"Alright, sensei! Where is it?"

"Go down Takebayashi street to the Ginzou Bank building, then turn left. Pass Akagawa bridge and then you should see the Heart of Stone sign somewhere on the left side (3); it's a Go salon. Just leave the order with whoever is manning the counter; they will give you the money."

As soon as Mizuhara had mentioned the word Go, Sai had turned completely silent and was watching intently. Hikaru, too, had listened up, finding it curious how often Go appeared in the most unexpected places.

He took the plastic bag and nodded to the old man. "Be back in twenty minutes, sensei!"

With those words, he took off with Sai trailing behind. The ghost easily caught up to him, asking questions a mile a minute. "Go salon? Hikaru, what is a Go salon? Do they really play Go there, or is the name just misleading?"

Nodding, Hikaru explained. "Yeah, there really are people who play Go. Grandpa took me to one ages ago, and there were loads of old geezers brooding over their boards, and I really didn't like it. But you got to pay money to be allowed to play there."

"Pay money? Do they teach you there?"

"No. You got to pay to be allowed to play. For learning, there are Go classes. And yes, you have to pay for them, too."

Sai nodded with a pensive expression on his face. "Ne, Hikaru... Can we - "

"No!" Hikaru almost shouted, already aware of what the ghost was going to ask. "No, we can't play there. First, I've still got work for an hour, second, I really don't want people to think I'm some super-good player when it's you doing all the work."

"And what about you?"

"What about me?"

He could already see the opulent building of Ginzou Bank, looking for the street Mizuhara-san had mentioned. Because of the throng of people he was currently caught in, Hikaru had trouble continuing his conversation with Sai as the ghost was often hidden by people until he faded through them. After he had crossed the street and walked into the less populated side street where the salon was supposed to be located, Sai finally caught up again.

Hikaru repeated his question. "What about me?"

Sai briefly looked surprised, then remembered what they had been talking about before they had been interrupted. "Why don't you play?"

Hikaru shot him an incredulous look. "Me? No way. I'm not some old geezer."

Sai pouted. "But it would be fun..."

"Fun for who?" Hikaru snorted. "For you watching me bumble around the board? For me playing old, smelly people? For those geezers having someone young to entertain them? No way. I'm going there to deliver ramen, but that's it."

He didn't catch Sai shaking his head in dismay since he had just passed the small bridge and found the Heart of Stone sign in a tall column of garishly colorful advertisements. An arrow pointed to a small alley that was barely broad enough to fit a car. He followed it, raising an eyebrow when he caught another sign pointing him to a basement entrance at the side of some kind of office building.

That certainly didn't look very trustworthy, and he was starting to get a bad feeling.

Sai didn't look very enthused, either. "Ne, Hikaru, are you sure we have gone the right way?"

Standing in front of the iron basement door, Hikaru shrugged. "That's where the arrows point, isn't it?"

He carefully grabbed hold of the doorknob and pulled. To his surprise, the door came open easily, far easier than its heavy solidness would have suggested. He barely avoided smacking himself in the face.

He was rewarded with the sight of a well-lit hallway, with several doors leading off to different rooms. Contrary to the metallic entrance door, they were marked with plates announcing what they contained. He could see a dentist, a lawyer, a tiny media company, and two psychologists. And smack-dab in the middle, there was Heart of Stone. It was the only door that had a glass pane in the middle, allowing him to see that there was light burning inside. He couldn't distinguish anything else because the glass was milky and intransparent.

Shrugging to himself, he pulled the door open, Sai quietly trailing behind him. The first thing he noticed was that it smelled of smoke. Strongly.

Drawing a grimace, he barely kept from coughing at the pungent odor. The second thing he caught sight of was a pudgy, old woman glaring at him from behind a counter next to the door. She looked like she had just bitten into a lemon. And yes, the rest of the room was filled with tables and goban and smelly, old people. Not one of them looked younger than 40, not even the unfriendly woman at the counter.

He walked up to her, setting the plastic bag on the counter. She looked at it as if Hikaru had just placed a pile of dog turd in front of her.

"Take-out from Mizuhara's. I was told to deliver it here," Hikaru commented.

She looked inside to see whether the order was complete and huffed. "Should have known. Can't expect young hooligans like you to know how to play Go. How much?"

"2150 Yen. And, just for your information, I do know how to play Go."

"Yeah, right," she snorted. "I bet you just know enough to place the stones on the grid instead of the squares. You definitely don't look like the brainiac type to me."

She grabbed several wads of bills from behind the counter and handed him 2000 Yen, but counted out the remaining 150 in small change, 10- and 5-Yen coins.

Slowly, Hikaru was growing angry. "Look, I don't know what died on your doorstep this morning, but you don't have to insult my intelligence. So what if my hairstyle is a bit vibrant? Doesn't mean that what's on my head is the same as what's inside."

She focused on him sharply. "Is that your roundabout way of saying that you do know Go?"

Snorting, Hikaru swept the small change into the wallet Mizuhara had provided him for situations like this. "Not that it's any of your business, but yes."

"Prove it."

Hikaru turned around, looking for the speaker who had snuck up behind him. It was an older man, graying hair, but a very clever look in his eyes. "Why should I? I don't need to prove myself to you, and I need to go back to work, anyway."

The man squinted at the bag of take-out on the counter. "You work for Mizuhara? I know him, he won't mind. Tell him I wanted to play a

game with you, and he'll be alright."

Hikaru rolled his eyes. "If you give me that on paper, I'll do it, just so that you shut up and stop harassing me. Who are you, anyway?"

The man's face contorted in mock-anger as he clung tightly to Hikaru's arm. "Respect your elders, brat! I'm the great Kawai Kenji, and I'll show you not to brag about Go if you can't back it up!"

"Fine," Hikaru grunted, "I'll trash you, gramps!"

He was immediately dragged to a goban, and only then did he realize what exactly he had agreed to. He glanced over at Sai who had been suspiciously silent the entire time. The ghost looked at him from behind his thrice-cursed fan with an amused expression.

Yeah, laugh it up, Hikaru grumbled. He didn't quite see the humor in the situation because he was very much annoyed that his quick temper and even quicker mouth had yet again gotten him into a situation he really, really didn't want to be in.

"Nigiri."

The old geezer's shout brought his attention back to the board. He had instinctively grasped one of the go-ke and had found out that he had gotten black. But what did the geezer want now? Shouldn't they play?

Take either one or two black stones and place them on the Goban, Hikaru, Sai urged him on.

Hikaru did as he was told, with no clue what was going on. Sai chuckled in his mind.

This is how the colors are chosen when there is no handicap and no machine to help you. Kawai-san is older, so he has taken a handful of white stones. You have to guess whether he has an even or odd

number of stones in his hand. If you guess right, you get the black stones.

It turned out that Hikaru had guessed odd while the man held an even number of stones, so the old geezer was the one who started with a daring 5-4 move. Hikaru fumbled a bit with his stones but managed to place his on a more conservative 4-4 spot. The old man gave him a raised eye-brow at the insecure way he handled the stone and Hikaru glared at him. "What? Got a problem?"

The man snorted at the same time as Sai reprimanded him for his rudeness. "You move like a novice. Who in the world holds his stones like that?"

Hikaru rolled his eyes. "Perhaps someone who's never played on a real goban before? And, yes, I do know how to play."

Chuckling, the man reached into his own goke and slammed down a stone in the upper left corner, which left the lower right to Hikaru. From then on, the game developed quickly and Hikaru had little trouble keeping the old man in check. A short glance to the side showed that Sai was completely focused on the board, and Hikaru had to smile. Then he tuned back to the stones and the patterns.

It took about half an hour to get the man to give up, and Hikaru quickly thanked him for the game. They had drawn several observers, who Hikaru hadn't noticed because of his single-minded concentration on the game. He panicked a bit when they started to congratulate him and ask him questions. They actually sounded amazed by his skills.

Hikaru looked at the time with wide eyes and tried to weasel his way out of the crowd. "Look, guys, I really got to go, Mizuhara-san probably expected me half an hour ago, so I got to hurry. Kawai-san, you promised me a note to give to Mizuhara-san?"

The way the old man stared at him didn't set Hikaru at ease at all. The geezer looked more like someone about to eat him or molest

him or something like that. Quickly, Hikaru backed away. "Alright, alright, no need to scare me like that. I'll go, no problem."

Then, all of a sudden, the man broke into a broad grin, wrapped an arm around Hikaru's neck, and gave him a noogie. "What do you know! The punk can really play! But the next time, you won't defeat the Great Kawai so easily!"

Hikaru began to struggle in earnest, the guy's over-enthusiastic friendliness cutting off his air. *Help, Sai!* he wheezed mentally, but the anxious ghost only passed through all appendages instead of unwrapping them from Hikaru's neck.

When he was finally released, he quickly put as much distance between them as he could. With a frown, he said a quick good bye and got the heck out of dodge. Those people were creepy!

(1) Touya Akira becoming 1-Dan a year before Kadowaki: Now that there's no Shindou in the picture, there won't be anyone to dissuade Kadowaki from entering the pro exam the first time.

(2) Shodan: Japanese expression for the rank of professional 1-dan

(3) Japanese directions: Japanese house numbers don't count where a building is, but when it was built. That means that if you've got two houses with the numbers 2 and 3, and the next house is built in between them, the succession of house numbers will be 2-4-3. So, since it is just about impossible to find a place by street and house number alone, directions in Japan always include important landmarks.

A/N: Slowly but steadily, the plot in the present is picking up. But if you think that Kadowaki's invitation is the end, you're completely wrong. We've almost reached the half-way mark, and there's still plenty of time left...

Thanks for all your awesome reviews! I've never had a story where such a high percentage of the reviews goes beyond a simple 'great story, update soon!'. I really appreciate!

Sakiku

Chapter 7

A/N: Thanks to Amarthame for her incredible work and her incredible patience with all my questions

Edit 7/24/09: Hisshou has pointed out that I misspelled ' *deishi* '. There's an 'i' too many, it's supposed to be ' *deshi* '. Many thanks for that!

Chapter 6

The noise of Igo Ramen didn't die down much, but Hikaru could feel a certain level of tension and awe in the diner. He didn't have time to look around, too busy preparing the large take-out order of the girl first in line.

On the other hand, he didn't really need to check as such a change in atmosphere was normally a reaction to one of the more famous pros coming in. Several of his customers, especially regulars, recognized most pros on sight. And the level of tension told him that it had to be one of the most famous ones.

He had trained his customers well, none daring to ask for an autograph or otherwise bother a pro, but they certainly were commenting on it. He wished they wouldn't do that, either, but there was only so much he could do.

Finally he was done, handing five large plastic cups over to the girl first in line. "Here you go. 2250 Yen."

She handed over a few bills and he quickly gave her the change and a plastic bag for the ramen cups. "Thank you very much. Have a nice day!"

He smiled at her and used the few seconds it took her to make way for the next customer to quickly scan the room and find out who had

caused that reaction. When he caught sight of the trademark, somewhat out-of-place white suit, his breath caught in his throat. Ogata Tengen. What was a high-class man like him doing in a ramen shop? And just why in the world was he coming in now after ignoring Igo Ramen for the six years it had been in business?

Hikaru's last game with *seiji* had been less than three weeks ago - were those two incidents related? If so, how had Ogata found out who he was in the real world?

He barely got his composure together in time for the next customer, a balding man in his fifties, to place his order. "One Miso Ramen Pork. No leek."

"For here or to go?"

The diner was quite full, almost no seats open. Lunch rush. "To go."

"One Miso Ramen Pork to go. Anything else?"

"No thanks."

"Alright. And you, ma'am," Hikaru addressed the next woman in line, "what can I get for you?"

She ordered a bowl of Beef'n Broccoli for here, and Hikaru added her order to his growing list. He had become so proficient that he could make up to five bowls at a time, ensuring that the crowd got their food reasonably fast. Still, sometimes he really could use a pair of extra hands, if only for hygiene's reasons. After collecting money, he had to wash his hands every time to get them clean enough to be able to handle all the food.

Perhaps Kimihara-san's suggestion hadn't been that bad.

He quickly prepared the two bowls, glad that he had already cut and sliced and diced most of the ingredients before the lunch rush. When it wasn't that busy, he liked making things completely fresh, but that

would take time he just couldn't afford wasting with so many customers to serve. Maybe he really should start looking into a cashier or kitchen help, or something like that.

Before he knew it, it was the Go Pro's turn to order. "One Go Special."

Hikaru did his best to keep his incredulity in check. Ogata Tengen wanting a Go-special? That was... mind-boggling. The sourly man really didn't look like he was one to enjoy solving tsumego for ice cream. No, there had to be some other reason, but heavens help him if he knew what was going on in the pro's head - or who had set the guy on him. Hikaru seriously doubted that a man like him would consider eating his lunch at a ramen restaurant, and demanding a Go-special on top, of his own accord.

He regained his composure as quickly as possible. "I'm sorry, Sir, I don't have any problems for your strength. I could give you a quantity of lower-level problems if that is alright with you."

The man nodded sharply, almost sneering. "Just give me the best you have."

Ah, yes, that was *seiji* 's rudeness in person. Not that he had expected otherwise, but it was a bit disturbing to be confronted with it face to face. "Alright," Hikaru nodded, getting the few sheets with problems for professional players. He only had five of them with two problems each, since there wasn't much demand for Go-specials on that level. The only one who ordered them with something of a regularity was Waya 7-dan, and even he hadn't gotten through all of them yet. "Here you go, Sir. I think it would be fair if you had to solve all five of them."

"Hn." Ogata took the papers and perused them more closely. Hikaru busied himself preparing his order, glad to have something to do other than trying not to stare at Ogata having a look at his tsumego. Really, he adamantly had to remind himself of one of his first Igo Ramen principles. Somehow, the situation with Ogata felt completely

different from when Touya or other pros of the New Wave visited, although Touya certainly was at Ogata's level. Did Ogata suspect that he had been playing with Hikaru over the Net? If so, what had tipped him off?

Hikaru was just about ready to tear his hair out in frustration, really not certain why Ogata's presence affected him so much when he'd kept his cool with any other pro.

"One Go Special. 550 Yen." He placed the bowl and chopsticks at the counter in front of Ogata, seeing as the man's hands were full with the tsumego Hikaru had just handed him. The exchange of cash was quick and absentminded from the pro's side. Ogata didn't even look at the change Hikaru handed him, apparently either trusting that it was the correct amount or simply not caring.

As naturally as possible, Hikaru turned to his next customer. "Hello. What can I do for you?"

While noting down the woman's huge order, he watched from the corner of his eye as Ogata took the bowl and absentmindedly headed for the only free chair at the counter, his eyes still on the tsumego. Then, Hikaru thankfully was too busy to keep watching Ogata, trying to keep up with the lunch rush.

When the worst of it was gradually tapering off at half past one, his eyes once again wandered back to the imposing white suit. He had almost forgotten about him - keyword being 'almost'. Both the color and the manner of dress stood out in Igo Ramen's normal lunch crowd. The papers were turned face down in Hikaru's direction, Ogata not even looking at them while daintily picking at his ramen that must have turned cold by now.

"Are you done with the tsumego, Sir?" Hikaru asked, deliberately nonchalantly.

Ogata immediately looked up and Hikaru almost took a step back from the piercing glare. "Where did you get those problems from?"

Hikaru raised an eyebrow. What was *his* problem? Was the man here to investigate a suspected infringement of copyrights? "Mostly adapted from games I played. I didn't want to mess with royalties or copyright issues."

"Games you played?" Ogata's eyes narrowed even further as he shuffled through the tsumego, laying one on top. He pointed to the second problem on it. " *Deshi* ."

Crap. *deshi* was Hikaru's NetGo handle. How had Ogata made the connection? Or had he known / suspected beforehand and just looked for evidence?

Hikaru almost froze before he could bring himself to look at the tsumego. He recognized it, having copied it almost one to one from a game against *seiji* several months ago... oops. Of course *seiji* would recognize his own hands. And probably *deshi* 's, too. And once suspicious, he'd probably look for Hikaru's moves in the other tsumego, too. Well, there was no way Ogata Tengen didn't come up with four when counting two and two together.

Wryly, he smiled at the irate pro. "I guess you wouldn't believe me if I said I played *seiji*, would you?"

Ogata merely snorted. "So you really are an amateur after all."

"Told you, some people on the net actually are what they pretend to be."

"If your skills extend to the real world, you could be more. You are still young enough."

Now it was Hikaru's turn to snort. "Go is a hobby for me. Do you really think I have time to do more than play for fun when I've got Igo Ramen to run? And no, I won't give that up."

Ogata's face almost turned into a sneer. "Where there is a will, there is a way. If you aren't serious about Go, I don't see why I should

waste my time with you."

Hikaru's anger rose, not allowing himself to be intimidated by *seiji*'s more than impolite manner. If he was talking to *seiji* and not Ogata Tengen, he could answer equally brusquely - after all, *seiji* was only an anonymous NetGo player and not a title holder or a figure of authority. "And do what? You intend to play lower dans? Kyu? Isn't playing against any unpaying amateur a waste of your time?"

"When they refuse to play to the extent of their ability, yes."

"Hypocrite. If you think that, then you basically say anyone playing *seiji* is wasting their time because you certainly don't go all out. Pros like you are exactly the reason why I don't want to become one. When's the last time you've simply played a game for fun?"

For a while, Ogata didn't say anything, and Hikaru became aware of the people left and right who were desperately trying to look like they hadn't been listening in. And he became aware of just what had slipped his tongue in his anger. If Sai had still been alive, the ghost would have had his head for showing such a level of disrespect. *seiji* or not, this was Ogata Tengen he was talking to at the moment.

The pro's eyes were narrowed, piercing into Hikaru with an intensity he had trouble standing up to. But Hikaru knew that if he backed down and apologized now, he would lose all respect Ogata might have developed for *deshi* over the course of their games. Mulishly he glared back, waiting for the pro's response.

Fortunately, before too much of an awkward silence spread, Ogata got up and smirked. "Well met. I think you have customers waiting."

He shoved the tsumego in Hikaru's direction, turning around to walk away. He threw over his shoulder, "Oh, and you can keep your ice cream."

Hikaru had to grit his teeth at so much arrogance. On the other hand, he had just gained a small victory in his verbal spar with the pro.

Exhaling slowly, he gathered Ogata's abandoned tsumego and placed them under the register to have a look at them later on. He could have sworn he had seen Ogata scribble on a few of them. And he still didn't know why the pro had come into Igo Ramen in the first place.

Then, he turned to his next customer with a smile that was a little forced at first but quickly turned into his routine one. "Hello. What can I get for you?"

And Igo Ramen went back to its usual hectic business.

After he closed the diner for his afternoon break, he almost forgot to get the papers from under the register. A quick glance showed that, indeed, Ogata would have gotten a popsicle. He had marked the right spots in nine of the ten problems, with the tenth being the excerpt from their game. Hikaru had to shake his head. Arrogant, yes, but boy could *seiji* back it up...

With a sigh, Hikaru flopped onto his bed, switching on the TV with an absent-minded gesture that had become almost second nature by now. Three months ago, he had finally saved enough money from his meager pay at Mizuhara's that he was able to afford the small screen. In the beginning, his parents hadn't been very happy about Hikaru having his own TV in his room, but since he kept up his grades and Mizuhara only had good things to say about him, they grudgingly accepted it.

And anyway, most of the time, the TV was tuned into some kind of Go-related channel to keep Sai preoccupied while Hikaru went off and did other things like homework, his chores, or sleep. As a ghost, Sai didn't have to rest, so he tended to become very, very bored during those long night hours when Hikaru wasn't awake.

Today had been very exhausting. After two lessons at school, Hikaru had gone to Mizuhara's, and there he had worked relentlessly until six in the evening, only to be forced to deliver a last order of take-out

to the Heart of Stone Go-salon and then play a few teaching games there.

Ever since he had bested Kawai-san the very first time he had gone there, all patrons insisted that he play with them whenever he came by. They had even gotten Old Man Mizuhara in on it.

On the one hand, it was good that Hikaru didn't get into trouble for being forced to stay at the salon and play; on the other hand, it meant that both Mizuhara and the regulars timed their orders so that Hikaru was sent out only a short time before he got off anyway and had no excuses not to stay and play.

Today, they hadn't let him go until eight, and even then only under protest. Only the threat of homework had been somewhat effective. The worst thing though was that he really did have some work to do for Math. At least it wasn't due until next week. He was too tired to do it right now.

"Ne, Hikaru?"

Hmmm? he answered, half asleep. Sometimes it could be advantageous not having to move his mouth to talk to Sai.

"Why don't you ever play for real?"

The TV mumbled softly in the background, exuding a soporific presence.

What? He was too tired to follow Sai's leaps of logic. He didn't have a clue what Sai was talking about.

The ghost was hovering above his bed, having managed the fine art of finding purchase in thin air. From what Sai had told him, it was quite difficult convincing one's mind that, no, he wasn't going to fall even if there was nothing holding him up.

This discovery had resulted from one of their talks after Sai had once again accidentally walked through the bathroom door, which Hikaru had closed behind him to have some privacy. Sai had apologized profusely and admitted that it really didn't feel any different for him whether he walked through thin air or through objects. As soon as Hikaru had calmed down, he had asked Sai whether there was anything that felt solid to him. Sai had shaken his head sadly, and Hikaru had tried to cheer him up by pointing out that at least the floor had to be solid, otherwise the ghost would have sunk into it a long time ago.

Sai's expression had been priceless. And then, he had proceeded to stick his hand several inches into the formerly solid floor. It had been Hikaru's turn to sport a priceless expression.

After several more experiments, they had decided that for ghosts the expression 'mind over matter' was quite a bit more real than for regular people. Actually, for Sai mind was matter. As long as Sai was convinced that whatever he was standing on was solid, he had no problem doing so. Even if it was thin air.

Sai had experimented a bit more with that new-found skill and had advanced to where he could feel the surface of objects if he concentrated a lot. Sadly though, his touch couldn't manipulate anything in the physical world - even though Sai had repeatedly poked Hikaru in the face, Hikaru hadn't felt a thing.

As it was, Sai was hovering above him, looking down at Hikaru with a very serious expression on his face. Hikaru sighed a bit when he realized that this was something important to the ghost and that Sai wouldn't let up until he had Hikaru's full attention.

He sat up and rubbed his face to chase off his fatigue. *What is it, Sai?*

"Hikaru. How serious are you about Go?"

Huh? Bleary-eyed, he blinked at the ghost. *Sorry if I'm not as fanatic about it as you. But I told you that from the beginning.*

Sai gave him a long look. "Why do you play at all?"

Because it's the only way for you to play some games. That was obvious.

"But it is not I who played against Kawai-san today."

Hikaru rolled his eyes. He could see where that was going. *I already told you a thousand times that there's no way I'm going to pretend I'm some kind of Go genius when it really is you who does all the playing. I don't want to get all the attention that should belong to you.*

"I know that," Sai nodded. "But why did you start playing at Heart of Stone at all? If you didn't want to, you could have stopped at any time."

Shrugging, Hikaru realized that Sai had a point. *Don't know. Guess that it just happened. Playing those old geezers is fun.*

Sai's smile turned enigmatic. "Yes, playing Go can be really enjoyable. But you don't give it everything you have when playing them, do you?"

Nah, why should I? They're bad enough about my skills as it is. I really don't want them to start with the insei stuff again. Anyway, I'm always playing you for real. That's more than enough for me, thank you very much. Sometimes, I feel like I'm bashing my head against a solid stone wall, if you know what I mean.

"So you have never thought about pitting your strength against other people?"

Not really. I don't need any more people trying to convince me that I should make Go my life. It's fun and all, but I can't imagine having to play it for the rest of my life just to make some money. By now,

Hikaru was completely awake again. He was wondering what Sai was trying to get at. Sometimes, his conversations with the ghost could be very roundabout, especially when it involved Hikaru and Go.

"You don't mind being seen playing a boring game like Go with old geezers anymore?"

Hikaru gave the ghost the evil eye. *You're mean. That was, like five years ago! For your information: I'd like to think that I have grown out of such childishness.*

"Oh, but I think I can remember you telling me the exact opposite less than a year ago. I believe that was when Kawai-san suggested going to an amateur tournament."

Yes, Sai was making fun of him. Hikaru haughtily lifted his nose. *So what if I did? It wasn't as if there weren't any old geezers there.*

Finally, Sai was laughing. But much too soon, he turned serious again. "Hikaru. Even if you don't want to make Go your life, I don't think what you are doing at the moment is healthy. Don't think I haven't seen how you turn all your games into teaching games. It is very nice that you want to help Kawai-san and the others improve, but you have to think of yourself sometimes, too. I am the only one you play seriously, and at the moment, I am not a good opponent for you anymore. You have improved enough that you can see the full extent of my skills, and I scare you."

Hikaru wanted to interrupt, but Sai held up a hand. "Don't deny it. I can see how your Go has grown solely to counter mine, and after I continued to beat you, it has become fearful. If you truly want to grow, now is the time to play people other than me."

I... For a long time, Hikaru didn't know what to say. He could see how Sai was right. Although he gave his everything in his games against the ghost, he had come to expect his defeat. And going into a game with such an attitude was the best way to make it reality.

Additionally, he had begun to realize that he felt adrift when people played hands Sai wouldn't play. He just didn't know how to react to moves that were not part of Sai's Go.

He shrugged helplessly. *I think I can see what you mean. But I don't know what to do about it. I don't think it would help if I played the guys at Heart of Stone seriously, and I really don't want to get into the insei crowd. You're just about the only one I have.*

Sai cocked his head. "What about the magic box? I have met several opponents there that could give you a challenge."

The magic box? For the first time, Hikaru looked directly at Sai, astonishment in his eyes. *But, Sai, I have little enough time to spend on the computer, and if you want me to play for myself, I might not be able to play for you, too. I can see how much you need to play Go, so it wouldn't be fair of me to take that away from you.*

"Hikaru. Why should I mind watching my student improve? You have been watching me play for years, so why shouldn't it be the other way round for once?"

Sai had called Hikaru his student.

Somehow, that simple statement took Hikaru's breath away. He didn't know why, but hearing Sai acknowledge him in such a matter-of-fact way touched something deep inside Hikaru. Maybe it was because he respected Sai's opinion very much. Maybe it was because Sai had said the word as if it was the most natural thing in the world. But Hikaru had trouble tearing his thoughts away from that one, simple thing.

Blinking his eyes several times to get rid of his suddenly blurring vision, he tried not to let his grin stretch from one ear to the other. *Well, if you really don't mind... Now that you've got me awake, what do you say that I try it?*

Without waiting for the ghost, he jumped out of his bed and stormed off towards his father's home office and, more importantly, the computer within. He heard a faint "Hikaruuu! Wait for meee!" that abruptly became clearer when Sai faded through the wall into the corridor.

The ghost was back to his usual manic behavior, as if he hadn't been dead serious just moments before. Hikaru had to smile at his constant stream of babble and his frantically whirring arms. As soon as the login-window for NetGo appeared though, Sai was practically hanging over his shoulder.

Hikaru clicked on the button for 'New Account', and filled in the necessary registration forms. It was good that he had more than one e-mail address because there was a one-account-per-e-mail-address rule. Not that it was stated as such, but the way the registration process was set up, it more or less meant the same.

"What are you doing, Hikaru?" Sai apparently didn't follow what he was doing.

I'm creating my own account. I want to play for myself, not as you.

"Oh. What are you going to call yourself? There are so many strange names around."

Hikaru had to laugh. Sai had never understood the need for names like 'ILuvTouya', 1337 abbreviations (1), or simple nonsense like 'megaCarrotOfDoom'. In Sai's opinion, it would be much easier if everyone went by their own names, even if it meant having ten Satou Ichirou on one server. *You'll see.*

Slowly, he typed in five letters. D-E-S-H-I. *deshi* . Student. A simple word, but it said everything about who Hikaru was.

"Can we play now?"

Hikaru looked up at Sai. The ghost was smiling, and Hikaru was content. *Yes, we can.*

And *deshi* took his first steps into the NetGo universe.

(1) 1337: a method of substituting numbers for letters that look similar. '1337' translates to 'leet', short form of 'elite' (1 = 'l', 3 = 'E', 7 = 'T'). 1337-speak is mainly used in hacker- and gamer-circles for individuals to distinguish themselves and show their superiority by disguising what they are talking about (those who can't read leet and thus are those not in the know, are considered highly uncool).

A/N :

After a few comments, I realized that I was killing off people left and right - first Touya Meijin, then Kawai, and I'm not sure whether I have mentioned it yet or not, but Hikaru's grandfather won't be far behind. To be honest, I had half a mind of getting rid of his parents the same way; instead I just ignored them. You will probably also have noticed Hikaru's astonishing lack of real-life friends beyond the Heart of Stone crowd - he's become quite the recluse, actually.

To be honest, that came about because of my laziness. I really didn't want to be bothered by inventing new friendships or having to remember any other personal relationships except for the most important ones. Later on, I just told myself that this kind of development wasn't too implausible so I didn't do anything to fix it.

If you think this was a glaring mistake, please tell me.

Sakiku

Chapter 8

A/N: Many thanks to Amarthame for her awesome help.

Chapter 7

Hikaru leaned back in his computer chair and sighed. He had just finished a game against *moon3* and had won by a narrow margin. That guy was *good* ! He'd had Hikaru fighting until the very last hand, something he rarely had to do nowadays. Hikaru had gone all out, too, giving even more testament to *moon3* 's skills since not many Internet players, even 7d, tended to last long against Hikaru anymore.

On the other hand, Hikaru supposed he shouldn't look at the game as a testament of *moon3* 's skills but rather one of his own. *moon3* was the Japanese representative at this year's World Amateur Go Championship, meaning *moon3* was one of Japan's strongest amateurs. And Hikaru had just defeated him.

To be honest, Hikaru was very much surprised that *moon3*, or Arawaki Hideo in real life, had been online at all. Hikaru had been even more surprised when *moon3* had challenged him. Hikaru knew for a fact that Arawaki-san was currently in Japan, so it was 3 a.m. for him, too. He'd have thought that participating in such an important tournament in less than a week would cause *moon3* to stick to preparing in the real world and staying awake at slightly more... normal hours.

But no, *moon3* had challenged him, and from the feel Hikaru had gotten from the pattern of their stones, both of them had gone all out. And Hikaru had still come out victorious.

Over the years, he had played *moon3* several times, and this game increased their score to 11-10 in Hikaru's favor. Merely glancing at

the amount of games won and lost, they were almost equal in strength. But if one compared their first 10 games against their second 10 games, there was a clear improvement in Hikaru's win-loss ratio. While he had lost seven of their first ten games, he had lost only three in the second half, and their 21st game increased Hikaru's winning streak to five in a row.

Hikaru supposed that he shouldn't read too much in his seeming success because he couldn't be sure Arawaki-san had always played with his full strength during their past matches. But tonight's match had clearly gone to Hikaru. Well, maybe that was because Arawaki-san was tired from studying for the championship.

They had already discussed the game, and Hikaru's eyes were getting heavier even though going to bed at 3 a.m. was something completely normal for him. Still, he had some questions for *moon3* that had been spawned by all those happenings during the past three weeks. Practically every day someone told him more or less directly that he should go pro, and Hikaru was wondering whether Arawaki-san had experienced similar times. Although he doubted that Arawaki-san had had the pleasure of being visited by a titleholder solely because said titleholder had accidentally caught wind of his tsumego because some other pros had discussed them in the Ki-in. Really, Hikaru hadn't made those tsumego for Waya 7-dan to share amongst his pro friends...

-Can I ask you something personal?- He typed after deliberating for a bit. Worst case was that Arawaki-san just didn't answer.

-... Depends on how personal it is.-

-You don't really keep it a secret who you are in RL, so do you mind if I ask you something about that?-

-Again, depends on what it is.-

Despite its brevity, Hikaru took that short answer as a sign to continue. - *You are good enough to be Japan's representative at the*

World Amateur Go Championship in Tokyo in a week. Why haven't you gone pro?-

Several seconds passed before the reply came. - I didn't make it as an insei.-

-But you are still young enough to take the pro-exam. Why don't you?-

-I plan on taking it this year after the amateur tournament is done.-

-Oh... - Arawaki-san was going pro, too? Well, that more or less made Hikaru's question obsolete. But why this all of a sudden? In all the magazines and newsgroups, he hadn't heard anything of Arawaki-san joining the pro-exam. The pro-exam would begin in roughly two months and, since Arawaki-san wasn't one of the top eight insei, he had to get through the prelim rounds first. On the other hand, Arawaki-san might get a sure spot because he was recognized as one of Japan's best amateurs.

-?? You think I shouldn't turn pro?-

Hikaru blinked. That was not what he had meant. - Eh? No, no, no, you've got it wrong. I've kind of been hounded by several pros lately who all want me to take the exam. I thought it would be nice to get an opinion of someone who didn't take it.-

... So you aren't a pro?-

Oh, come on. moon3 wasn't serious, was he? - What!?! No, I'm not! Where did you get that idea?-

-You do know that it would have been a very close fight if you had challenged me for the right to go to Tokyo? I thought the reason you didn't enter was that you weren't an amateur. Heck, I've played 4p who're less skilled than you. You know, there actually are quite a few rumors around about who you might be.-

This was getting better and better. So the only reason he wasn't hounded on the internet was because everyone thought he already was a pro? - *You're not just pulling my leg, are you?*-

-There are several names flying around, mostly lower pro-dans.-

-... I can tell you for sure that I'm not a pro. Anything else I can't deny or confirm because I haven't heard those rumors. And, you're as good as some pros, too. Hm, that might actually make you even more of an expert on my question. Can I ask you why you stayed an amateur for so long, and why you suddenly decided to become pro?-

Despite his fatigue earlier, he was now wide awake as he curiously waited for *moon3* to reply. He had asked a very personal question, and there were plenty of people still watching their after-game chat. Hm, maybe he should have asked to take this to a more private chat room...

Finally, there came a response. - *To be honest, I never actually planned on becoming pro. But three months ago, the company I was working for hit such a bad spot that they just had to lay off people. I volunteered to go because I've got a very good chance of finding another job with Go. Others don't have that kind of second option. So... money, I guess, is my reason for becoming pro.-*

That was... unexpected. Unemployment in Japan was very low, but at the same time very dangerous. Big companies were like families for their employees, ranging from company housing to medical insurance to retirement pensions, company-wide activities, company-sponsored entertainment, etc. Contrary to what Hikaru had heard of Western business practices, Japanese employees generally stayed with their company for life.

So, being laid off was a very serious hit because it was a sudden loss of everything. Present, future, friends, livelihood. Additionally, it was very hard finding a new job in another company because every company was their own little family and not very open to outsiders. They preferred filling positions with their own people and just taking

in students from high school or university instead of giving a high position to an outsider.

In the end that meant that, once laid off, one had to see how to keep oneself alive. At least in these days, it wasn't as strict as it had been, say, fifty years ago. In 2012, there were social support structures like unemployment pay, help with finding new jobs, and very cheap community housing. It was possible to at least stay alive with that kind of support. On the other hand, very few people could suppress their pride long enough to accept such help. Every now and then, people were found in their apartments, starved to death because they didn't have the money to buy food and couldn't bring themselves to steal or accept unemployment payment.

To be honest, Hikaru was sometimes glad that he was his own boss, and that there was no way he'd lay himself off. On the other hand, he'd have the exact same problem if Igo Ramen went belly-up. A decision like Arawaki's must have taken a lot of courage.

-Thank you very much for telling me something this personal.- Hikaru wrote. *-So, without your current circumstances, you wouldn't have thought of becoming pro?-*

-No. I like Go very, very much, but at the same time I liked my other job, too. And I didn't want to be restrained by having to play and having to win. The option of just saying 'no' is very much underrated. You know, before his death in that plane crash, Touya Kouyo once said that he was very much looking forward to becoming an amateur once he retired from his pro life. (1)-

-... If it's just the money, you could just as easily become a Go teacher or write some books. With your success in national and international tournaments, your name is already well-known, and I don't think you'd have any trouble getting customers.-

-That is what I'm going to do if turning pro doesn't work out. I'm 29, so this is my one and only chance of participating in the pro exam. If I'm lucky, I get another shot next year, but then that's it. But, you

know, since I've already decided to make my money with Go, why not go for the whole package? Having been a pro can only help if I decide to focus on teaching instead of playing.-

Hikaru smiled. - *Then I wish you best luck for the pro-exam. And, of course, for next week, too. When the WAGC tournament is over, you should have a look at the games of akatsuki5, treehousebuilder, and masterOfTheUniverse. They're this year's top insei and your competition in the pro-exam.-*

Hikaru had played all three of them, and they really deserved their title of top insei. To be honest, he only knew they were insei because *akatsuki5* had bragged a bit too much about being the best, and that no mere amateur player could play on the same level as an insei. Hikaru had taken it upon himself to take them down a peg, but if what *moon3* had said was true, that might not have worked as intended. If everyone thought he was a pro, the educational value of being defeated by *deshi* was more or less nonexistent.

Over the years, Hikaru had played many insei, and he had gotten a good feel for just how strong they could be. Most of the top amateurs and top NetGo players were insei, or at least had been at one time. And even for insei, *akatsuki5* and *masterOfTheUniverse* were strong. It wasn't too unusual for new pros to already be at a 3-4p level. Every single one of the New Wave had had at least the skill of a 3p during their shodan years. Touya Akira-pro had even been able to play with 5-6p on even footing.

Hikaru estimated that Arawaki-san was at just about the same level as *akatsuki5*, so it would be good practice for him to play *akatsuki5* before facing him across a real goban. At such a high level, having an idea of someone's style could be the deciding factor. And since many of Arawaki-san's games were public but almost nothing was known about insei, it would be unfair to let *akatsuki5* prepare but not Arawaki-san.

-Really? Thanks for the warning! I've played treehousebuilder several times before, and he's really good. If the others are on the

same level, I've got my work cut out for me.-

Hikaru nodded to himself. - Yes. *Four months ago, akatsuki5 had been reasonably easy for me to defeat in an even game, but since they still grow in leaps and bounds at that age I bet it would be me struggling nowadays. Anyway, thank you very much for answering my questions. You helped me a lot.-*

They exchanged a few more polite phrases before Hikaru finally logged off. He leaned back in his computer chair and stared at the blank screen for a while. Arawaki-san really was an interesting character, and his reason for turning pro even more interesting. Hikaru wondered whether he'd be able to make the same choice if he were in Arawaki-san's place.

Hm.

Well, even if Hikaru decided to become pro, it would be too late to join this year's pro-exam. That meant that he still had plenty of time to decide. And then again, it wasn't as if next year was his last chance. He was 25 right now, and he could take the pro-exam until he was 30.

So, the next thing Hikaru was going to do was watching the World Amateur Go Championship. He was very much looking forward to seeing *moon3* play on television. After all, the new station GoTV had promised to cover every day of the WAGC live.

"Ha! Take that!" Hikaru pumped his hand in the air. "The game is mine!"

In the background, he heard his mom calling that he shouldn't yell at the computer, but he was too elated to listen to her. Hikaru had just sprung a very elaborate trap that he had set up many hands ago, and which was going to turn everything in his favor.

Finally! *5otaku98* was a very tricky opponent who had been giving Hikaru quite a headache with his ability to somehow slither his way out of every ambush Hikaru had planned. But fortunately, *5otaku98* hadn't counted on Hikaru deliberately setting up obvious traps to steer him right into the underlying, much more dangerous one.

Ten hands later, *5otaku98* also seemed to see the trap he had unwittingly sprung, and that there was no way he'd be able to recover. He resigned, together with a compliment on Hikaru's reading skills. After a few more polite phrases, Hikaru logged out and leaned back in his chair.

That was a good game, wasn't it, Sai?

The ghost, who had been watching everything over Hikaru's shoulder, nodded emphatically. "Yes, yes, very good! You have grown a lot, Hikaru. This Go otaku (2) was a very challenging foe."

Hikaru snorted. *No kidding! This 5otaku98 is a professional shodan! It's a miracle that I lasted that long, let alone defeat him.*

"Really? How do you know he is a professional? It says that he is an amateur 7-dan, same as you." Sai radiated quite a bit of surprise.

Yeah, I thought so, too, until I recognized his playing style. You remember the second of the shodan matches this year, where Moriyama Hideyuki had to play Pakku 9-dan (3)? Go Weekly printed their game about a month ago, and you practically forced it down my throat because Moriyama played a modern variation of one of your Shuusaku-openings. 5otaku98 's Go feels just like Moriyama's. I bet they're the same person.

"Are you certain? You have only seen Moriyama-shodan play one game."

Hikaru nodded excitedly. *Yup! Did you see the way 5otaku98 tried to cut wherever he could? And how he tended to be thrown off whenever I didn't follow his joseki patterns? Moriyama did the same*

against Pakku. And Pakku 9-dan also had a heck of a time trying to set up traps against Moriyama. Moriyama's a very agile, attack oriented player who can read very far ahead, but he gets distracted by the obvious. 5otaku98's the same. This is the third time I've played against him, and he's moved that way every time so far.

When Hikaru turned to look at Sai, he saw a very pensive expression on the ghost's face. "That is interesting. Do you always recognize people's styles so easily?"

That depends. If I play them very often or if they've got distinct, personal styles, then yes. I'd recognize you just about anywhere. Even after all those years, your Go still feels... different from all the other players. Older.

Sai smiled slightly. "Is that so much of a surprise?"

Not really. Hikaru shrugged. *Hey, it's your turn now. I think I saw ayasegawa and hotchicksluver online. They're very good. You should play them.*

The ghost didn't say anything, which worried Hikaru considerably. *What's the matter? Don't you want to play? That would be a first.*

Sai hung his head, and his long hair fell forward to obscure his face. Miraculously, the tall hat didn't topple over. Hikaru grew more and more concerned, never having seen his constant companion behave like that. Usually, he just had to mention the word 'Go', and Sai was all happy and excited.

Well, come to think of it, Sai had been acting a bit strangely for quite some time now; Hikaru just hadn't realized it. For one, Sai hadn't been as enthusiastic about Go as usual. And Sai had been absent-minded quite a lot recently. More than once, he had caught the ghost staring off into the distance with a melancholic expression on his face.

Sai? He asked carefully.

Finally, the ghost looked at him again, with a smile as bright as any plastered on his face. "I want to play you, Hikaru."

The smile didn't look happy though, and Hikaru was growing more and more concerned. *You do? Please, Sai, tell me what's wrong. Don't pretend you want to play me when you don't.*

"But I do!" Sai insisted anxiously. "It's just... Hikaru, why am I here? Why have I been trapped in this ghostly existence for a thousand years? What have I done that the gods punish me so?"

Hikaru was utterly taken aback by the sheer desperation in Sai's voice. He didn't know what to say. *Don't you want to reach the Hand of God? I know that I haven't let you play very much lately, but you should have said something!*

"Yes, yes, the Hand of God. The one perfect move that I still haven't found despite playing Go for countless lifetimes. Hikaru, do you really think it's the gods' intention to have the dead overshadow the living? I have had my chance at the Hand of God while I was alive, so it seems unfair for me to steal your chance."

Oh dear. It looked like Sai was having a full-blown identity crisis, or whatever else one might call that. First off, Hikaru should work on calming him down. *Sai, you don't overshadow me. Yes, you were quite annoying in the beginning, but that was just because I couldn't understand your obsession with Go. I don't want to get mushy and all, but I guess I should say thanks for sticking with me for such a long time, even when I was a brat.*

"So... you don't hate me for trying to take over your life?"

No! How did Sai get that impression? I really don't hate you! And you didn't take over my life. Or is that you who's cooking ramen every day? And who suggested I become a ramen cook anyway? I seem to remember that it was a certain ghost who came up with that idea. If you really tried to take over my life, you would have forced me to become an insei or stuff like that.

There were tears gathering in Sai's eyes. "That was exactly what I did to Torajirou..."

Torajirou?

"Hon'inbou Shuusaku. I more or less stole his entire life. Every single one of his games, that was me in reality. Torajirou just moved the stones for me..."

Did he ever refuse to play for you?

Sai shook his head, tears flowing freely down his face. "No. Never."

Did you talk to him like you do with me? Did you teach him Go?

"Yes. He was the most precocious child, even at only seven years of age when he first found me. He was such a quick study, always happy to learn more. And I was glad to teach him. But never once did he want to play. He said that it should be me because I was closer to the Hand of God. He gave up his entire life just for me..."

Not for the first time, Hikaru cursed to the three heavens that he couldn't touch the ghost. He wanted to reassure Sai because he seemed to need some kind of physical contact. Instead, the slender form hugged itself, the long sleeves almost wrapping the entire way around his body. He looked absolutely pitiful like that.

Sai. Listen to me. That was Torajirou's choice. It was Torajirou's choice to let you play all the time, just like it was my choice that I wanted to play for myself. And you respected my choice.

"But... but you only started playing Go because I made you sick to your stomach!" Sai wailed.

Despite the seriousness, Hikaru had to laugh. *And I only went to school because my parents would have taken away my allowance.*

"You still go to school."

But that's only two classes this year, and then I'll be done with both school and my apprenticeship and become a ramen cook of my own. Do you think my parents were wrong to force me to go to school?

"Well... you always could have become a Go pro. They don't seem to need to finish school." Slowly, humor was making its way back into Sai's eyes.

See, Hikaru crowed, that's exactly what I mean! You gave me a choice, and that's all that counts. I bet Torajirou saw it the same way. Now, come on, a Go-starved ghost like you needs a game. Who do you want to play?

Hikaru counted himself successful when a slight smile spread across Sai's features, one that didn't look fake at all. "You. I think it is time for us to start playing again. I want to see how much you have learned with all those people in the magic box."

Really? Hikaru couldn't be happier. They hadn't played a single game against each other for the past nine months because Sai had said that it was important for Hikaru to broaden his horizon past Sai's influence. Ha! Prepare yourself! I bet I can play you at three stones right now!

"But, Hikaru, maybe you should -"

Three stones! You said I improved, and last time, I played you at four. Three or none at all. Hikaru crossed his arms and went mule stubborn.

Sai sighed and gave in, and without hesitation they fell back into their old ways of teasing and arguing with each other. Unsurprisingly Hikaru lost, but he was very proud of himself that he had been able to give Sai a run for his money.

Later that night, when Hikaru was in his bed and trying to fall asleep, Sai carefully asked, "Hikaru?"

Hmm? Sai's tone was unusual enough that Hikaru involuntarily listened up.

"Can I show you a game?"

Hikaru turned to his side and propped himself up with his elbow to look at the ghost. Somehow, despite it being completely dark in Hikaru's room, he always could see Sai as clear as daylight, with colors and all. Probably another effect of being a ghost and all.

Sai looked serious with a touch of anxiety. Was Sai still thinking about the same purpose-thing he had been going on about earlier? Whatever it was, it definitely was very important to the ghost.

How do you want to do it? My mom would kill me if I went back on the computer at half past eleven.

"I want to tell you."

Tell me? Hikaru was getting curious.

Sai nodded. "It will be like blind Go. I will call out the moves, and you have to follow them in your head."

Studying the ghost closely, Hikaru tried to ascertain his motives. *You know I've never tried anything like that. Are you sure you want to show me a game that's so important to you this way? I'm not sure I can follow completely.*

"Don't worry. You can do it." There wasn't an ounce of doubt in Sai's face. Instead, it was dominated by a strange look of concentration, which Sai usually reserved for very difficult games.

Alright, Hikaru acceded and lied back comfortably, closing his eyes. *Shoot.*

"16-3."

He had no problem visualizing an empty goban where black had just placed its stone above the upper right star point.

"17-16."

A white stone followed to the right of the lower right star.

"3-4."

It was very helpful that Hikaru already was used to accepting coordinates from Sai. He had no problem with placing the stones on his mental grid. Rather, they appeared almost without his conscious effort.

The further they got into the game, the more he had to work on keeping track of all stones. He had to see how new moves fit into old shapes and changed them into something completely different. He had to keep track of whether it was white's or black's turn. And he couldn't help but appreciate the skill of the two players.

This was a superb game, both opponents almost even, and middle game was nearly finished.

Then, all of a sudden, Sai fell quiet. The expected next move never came. Hikaru didn't understand why - there were still hands to be played, and the outcome wasn't certain yet.

Sai?

He didn't dare open his eyes lest he lose the concentration needed for the mental picture he so clearly saw in front of his eyes. It couldn't be that Sai had forgotten how the game continued, could it?

Finally, the ghost exhaled almost shakily. "That was the end of the game. It never got finished, and we never had an opportunity of playing again."

For a long time, Hikaru merely appreciated the incredible skill of both players. It was... breathtaking. Their styles were very similar, so

much that they seemed almost identical. But Hikaru was quite sure that white had been played by Sai - a Sai who hadn't heard of modern opening strategies yet. Playing on star points had only become common since the 1930s.

But then who was black? Black was almost as good as white, and played with almost the same style. Nonetheless, Hikaru felt that black couldn't have been Sai. Something was missing, something that Hikaru couldn't put his finger on. Black seemed a bit less certain of his skill than Sai usually was.

Judging by the similarities though, Sai must have known Black very well. They must have played together for years because both were intimately familiar with each other's moves. Maybe a student-teacher relationship, with Sai as the teacher because he played white? Couldn't have been too long ago though because both players' styles were very similar to Shuusaku's. That meant that someone from the Heian era was out.

All of a sudden, Hikaru knew who Black had been. Kuwabara Torajirou, the man who had helped Sai become Hon'inbou Shuusaku by placing the stones for him. Sai had practically told him earlier that day that Torajirou had been his student, and that Sai had been the only one Torajirou had ever played. So it was no wonder that their styles were so incredibly similar.

Was that why Sai had insisted Hikaru also play other people? Because Sai didn't want to have a second Torajirou?

Hikaru couldn't help himself anymore. He opened his eyes and looked at Sai.

Sai was staring at the ground between himself and Hikaru where, to Hikaru's astonishment, a perfect replica of the game Sai had just told him was situated. It glowed in the same ethereal light as Sai, with all details and colors almost preternaturally sharp.

And slowly, red blood began to spread from the top corner, in the exact same pattern as the blood stains he remembered being on Sai's goban...

Oh. So that was why the game had never been finished. Torajirou had died, and Sai had been sealed into the goban.

Slowly, the illusion faded away until nothing of the game was left. Hikaru and Sai were alone again in the dark room.

Finally, Sai smiled tearfully at Hikaru. "It was almost as if I could play again. As soon as you closed your eyes, this board appeared. And whenever I told you the moves and we both concentrated on the same things, the stones appeared. Hikaru, I could touch them and it almost felt *real*."

There was so much pain, but also so much happiness in Sai's voice. For the first time, Hikaru realized how exhausting such a long, bodiless existence had to be. To never be able to touch anything again... Even though Sai had practically achieved what so many were striving for, an immortal existence, Hikaru thought that the price was too high. Far too high. He was beginning to think that it was more of a curse than a blessing.

But on the other hand, he was grateful for Sai's existence. Who knew what would have become of him without a certain hyper, Go-obsessed ghost? And he was pretty sure that Torajirou had had a similar opinion.

You know, he commented thoughtfully, *if Torajirou had lived longer, he might have become your equal one day.*

Slowly, Sai shook his head. "I don't think so. Not with him letting me play all the time."

Still, he was an awesome player.

"Yes." Almost shyly, he continued. "Do you mind if I show you more of our games? It seems a shame that Torajirou and his Go should be forgotten."

I'd like that. Hikaru quickly glanced at his alarm clock. One in the morning. He barely suppressed a groan. *As long as it's not today. I've got school and work tomorrow...*

"Oh! I'm so sorry! I forgot that you need sleep!" Sai's arms were back to their wild waving, and his face contorted in a comical apology. In other words, everything was back to normal.

With a smile on his face, Hikaru settled himself comfortably back into bed and closed his eyes. *Good night, Sai.*

If talking about Torajirou was what Sai needed to get rid of his strange guilt and depression, then who was Hikaru to discourage him? After all, Torajirou was an awesome Go player, and this blind Go was really interesting. Maybe he should try it more often...

He didn't even hear Sai's whispered "Good night, Hikaru." He already was fast asleep.

(1) 'looking forward to becoming an amateur when retired': That quote actually exists, but it was made by Takagawa Shukaku (Honinbou for 9 times in a row). And since Touya-Meijin didn't have that encounter with Sai that forced him out of the pro league early, he was still a pro when he died.

(2) Go otaku: The number 5 reads as 'go' in Japanese, and 'otaku' means 'fan' as in fan girl / fan boy. So a name like 5otaku reads as 'Go fan' (if you look at Hikaru in the manga, he very often wears a T-shirt with the number '5' on it - same situation)

(3) Pakku 9-dan: Pak is a very common Korean surname. Since quite a few of Japan's top pros come from Korea, China, or Taiwan

(Cho Chikun, Cho U, O Rissei), I thought it a bit strange that in HnG all player names should be Japanese.

A/N: Thanks to everyone who spotted the 'deishi' in last chapter's last line. I fixed it now, and I hope I fixed all the 'deishi's of this and the following chapters.

Yes, I know, some people are getting impatient for Hikaru to turn pro, but I just hate it how there always is the impression that someone good at go *must* turn. There are just as many good reasons for staying amateur, just as there are reasons for turning pro that don't have anything to do with loving Go. Since I already went counter to most HnG fanfics and made Hikaru's growth *slower* than in the manga, I thought I should go the whole way and threaten the whole becoming-pro-business, too.

Sakiku

Chapter 9

A/N: Thanks to Amarthame for her incredible help!

Edit 09/10/09: Touya's Insightful Insight is a bit less insightful and tacky. No real change though.

Chapter 8

It was getting late, and Igo Ramen was slowly emptying. Finally. It meant that Hikaru's workload was getting lighter and that he could spare a few minutes every now and then to concentrate on the small TV he had installed in the corner, both to allow his customers to watch and to watch it himself. At the moment, GoTV was showing brief recaps of every single one of today's matches at the World Amateur Go Championship. This year, 76 nations had participated, and it had gone on in its usual 8-round Swiss style (1).

Swiss Pairing was a tournament system that had been invented to address the problems of round-robin and single-knockout. Round-robin required too many rounds, and single-knockout left too many players idle after the first few rounds. Swiss Pairing on the other hand worked by awarding players points after each round, one for winning and none for losing. Then, in the next round, players with equal point scores had to play each other. The person with the highest score after all 8 rounds was the winner.

The eight rounds of the WAGC were distributed over four consecutive days, with one round in the morning and one in the afternoon. That meant that, with 76 participating nations, there were 76 games a day for GoTV to comment upon. During the actual rounds, GoTV focused heavily on the main contestants, but in the evening, after the rounds were over, GoTV gave a brief summary of that day's games.

This year, there were a few very strong European players, predominately from Eastern Europe. And there was one guy from South America who also had a chance of making it into the top five. But, as usual, Asian players dominated the field with China, Korea, and Japan fighting for the title. Although, surprisingly, the guy from Czech Republic was keeping up right with them, better than Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Now that the sixth round was over, the main contest had been reduced to Arawaki Hideo, Zhang Suyang, Choi Han-Seam, and Ondrej Kulkov. All four of them had either five or six points, with the rest of the contestants scoring four or lower. The next day was going to decide which one of them was going to get the title.

Of course, Hikaru was hoping that Arawaki-san would get it, but he didn't think Arawaki's second confrontation with Choi Han-Seam in Round 7 was going to end any better than his first. In the fifth round, Arawaki had already faced the Korean, and he had lost by quite a margin. On the other hand, Choi had lost against Kulkov, who in turn had been defeated by the South American. Zhang was the only one to remain undefeated so far; on the other hand, Zhang hadn't had an encounter yet with any of the other top four. He'd have to survive first Kulkov, and then the winner of Arawaki vs. Choi.

This was going to be interesting.

The jingling of the door bell made him look up from the game of Greece vs. Panama. Compared to Japan or Korea, both Greece and Panama were barely at insei level, and it showed in their scores. Both of them had one point each, and they'd probably score in the high fifties or low sixties in the overall ranking. Watching their game was far less interesting than seeing that Touya Kisei had just entered Igo Ramen.

It had been about a month since Touya's last visit, on the evening he had gained the Kisei title. So, Hikaru supposed, it was just about time Touya came by once again.

"Hello, Touya-sensei! How is the Juudan tournament going?"

The pro smiled. "I will have to play Ogata-Tengen next week for the right to challenge Isumi-Juudan. You are watching the World Amateur Go Championship?"

"Yes. Waya 7-dan and Kurata 9-dan are overseeing it, aren't they? The camera caught them a few times."

"I think there also is a pro from the Kansei Ki-in, but I can't remember his name. And since Arawaki-san announced that he was going to take the pro-exam this year, there is a group of insei there, too. To scout out the competition, I think."

Hikaru laughed. "That's quite sensible, isn't it? After all, Arawaki-san easily is as good as any insei. I think he even has been able to hold his own against a few low-ranked professionals. Oh, but I've completely forgotten that you must be hungry. Your usual?"

"No problem. And I've been told I need to try the Go special."

Hikaru froze in his tracks. Touya Kisei didn't just ask for a Go special, did he? "... Eh, you do know that the Go special isn't intended to challenge a title-holder, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

For a while, Hikaru waited whether the pro would elaborate, but apparently Touya had exhausted his conversational capabilities. That was a bit surprising, since the man always was very polite and watchful of the rules of small-talk, and going by those rules, one couldn't just let such a statement hang in the air.

Finally, Hikaru sighed. "Alright, alright. One Go special. You know, it would be easier if I gave you the popsicle right now."

The pro smiled slightly. "But that would defeat the purpose of demanding your Go special, wouldn't it?"

Hikaru rolled his eyes. "I stand corrected."

He got out all the problems he had for pro-level, the same ones he had handed Ogata a week ago plus an additional one he had made in the meantime. "Since you obviously came here to get ice cream, do you care which kind of ramen you get with the Go special? Should I make your usual, or do you want to try something else?"

"The usual, please."

Nodding, Hikaru handed over the six professional-level tsumego pages and a pen. "Knock yourself out. Well, at least it might keep you busy until you get your ramen."

"Thank you very much." Touya's bowl-cut bobbed politely as he took a seat at the counter and begun studying the pages.

Hikaru shook his head and went off to prepare the food. First Ogata's visit last week, and now Touya. There was no way that that was coincidence. Had Waya 7-dan's big mouth reached even more people than he thought (Ogata apparently had overheard Waya 7-dan and Isumi Juudan discussing Igo Ramen and its owner), or was that Ogata's fault?

With half an ear, he listened to the GoTV commentator who was now giving the highlights of Hong Kong vs. Bulgaria. The other half was tuned in to his customers and the regular noise of Igo Ramen.

A couple was holding hands at the table right below the TV, caring only about themselves and the low conversation between them. Even their ramen seemed to take a secondary role. An older man seated near the register was slurping occasionally, never looking up from his mechanical intake of food. A group of high school boys seated at a table next to the only window was growing louder, joking with each other. And a middle-aged woman on the other end of the counter seemed to be unable to take her eyes off Touya.

If she were a school girl, all the looking up and looking away again and blushing would have been cute. In a 40 year old businesswoman - not so much.

While he was waiting for the noodle timer, Hikaru tried to decide whether he should say something. He wasn't sure where that infatuation came from - whether the woman recognized Touya as a pro, or whether she simply liked his looks. If she was merely looking, that was no problem, but if she started to make a move, Hikaru would have to find a tactful way of telling her of Igo Ramen's policy regarding pros. But he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

Then the noodle timer beeped and Hikaru quickly prepared Touya's ramen bowl. "Here you go."

He set it in front of the distracted pro, who just nodded absentmindedly. Touya had all six pages spread around him, frowning at them. He looked from one to the other and back again, frowning even more.

Hikaru raised an eyebrow. He didn't know what was so frown-worthy, but he guessed Touya would eventually tell him. In the meantime, he focused back on the television, catching the deciding hand of Israel vs. Brazil. And from the corner of his eye, he saw that the middle-aged woman was still sneaking glances at Touya.

But just when he decided to talk to the woman, she shook herself and turned towards Hikaru. "Check, please."

Hikaru quickly rang her up. "630 Yen, please."

She gave him 700, and he returned her change. "Thank you very much for visiting Igo Ramen. Have a nice evening!"

She nodded and briskly walked out of the diner, back to the cool businesswoman she had been.

Meanwhile, it was Norway vs. Russia, and Russia clearly was the better player. Norway had to resign before reaching end game. A quick glance around the room to see whether his customers needed anything revealed Touya chewing absentmindedly on his ramen while he studied the tsumego intently. Everyone else though seemed content.

Italy lost against England, and Mozambique against Georgia. The old man paid for his ramen, and a mother with two sons entered. She was carrying two gym-bags, probably the boys' for some kind of extracurricular sport. The younger of the sons (barely 10) demanded a Go special, whereas the older (early teens) was too cool for that.

Their mother glanced around the restaurant, saw Touya's very recognizable bluish-green bowl-cut and did a double-take. With wide eyes, she looked at Hikaru. Hikaru smiled at her and placed his index finger in front of his lips, in the universal gesture of keeping silent.

Nodding slightly wide-eyed, she turned out a nice smile and placed her order - one Go special shouyu, one regular miso, and one regular shouyu. All three with pork and seasonal vegetables, and eggdropps for the miso. She took her children to the table the businesswoman had just left, watching indulgently over her youngest while he was trying to solve some 15-kyu tsumego. And although she couldn't help one or two glances at Touya, she neither called her children's attention to him nor bothered him for an autograph or conversation or anything else fans were so fond of.

One more success for Igo Ramen's pro-policy.

Once everyone had their own ramen bowl, Hikaru went back to watching TV. Touya Kisei certainly was taking his time - he was still busy studying the six tsumego in front of him. Surely they weren't that interesting?

Meanwhile, GoTV had started covering the afternoon matches, showing that Panama didn't have a chance against Venezuela, and

that France had lost to Taiwan. Georgia had once again been victorious, Argentina too.

"Hey, Mister!"

Hikaru looked away from the TV to see the younger boy standing next to Touya, tugging on his suit jacket. The older was too preoccupied with his ramen to take notice of what his brother was doing, and their mother was nowhere in sight, probably on a bathroom break. Obviously the boy had taken advantage of that.

With amusement, Hikaru watched the pro startle and turn around. "Hm?"

The boy thrust his papers at Touya and asked in a conspiratorial voice, "Hey, Mister, you look like you know lots of Go, so can you tell me if I got it right? I need to get the ice cream, you know?"

Hikaru had to keep himself from laughing out loud. He'd bet nobody had ever approached Touya Kisei not because he was Kisei but because he 'looked like he knew lots of Go'.

Touya seemed similarly amused and raised an eyebrow. "You do know that the Go special demands that you solve it on your own."

The boy nodded enthusiastically. "Yep! I don't want you to help me, just tell me if I got it right."

Helplessly, Touya looked up at Hikaru, silently asking what he should do. Hikaru wasn't sure whether that was because the pro had no clue how to react to the boy, or whether he was trying to ask if he was allowed to help at all.

Shrugging slightly, Hikaru mouthed back that it was Touya's call; that way, Touya could claim that the boy had to do everything on his own if he was bothered by the child. Hikaru didn't think he was, but he didn't want to be presumptuous.

Nodding and smiling almost imperceptibly, Touya turned back to the boy who hadn't noticed their brief exchange. It seemed that Hikaru was a nonentity as far as the boy was concerned.

"Well then, let's have a look." Taking the boy's tsumego, the pro skimmed through them. "Hm. That already looks very good. But you should think again about those two problems. What would you do if I moved here?"

The boy clambered up onto the stool next to Touya, having to kneel on it to see over the counter. Chewing on his lip, he thought for a bit and pointed to an intersection with slightly pudgy fingers. "Then I go there."

The Kisei nodded, looking around searchingly. Finally, the pro tore a small piece off his napkin and used the pencil to color it black. Then he placed the make-shift Go stone on the spot the boy had pointed to. "I see." He tore off a second piece, this time not coloring it. "But then I would move here, and then all these stones are in Atari."

"Oh, that's right. Hmmm..." The boy frowned intently in concentration, trying to divine the answer. He was bent so far across the paper that his every breath made the improvised Go stones flutter in the wind. Touya merely kept watching patiently, some amusement still playing around the corners of his mouth.

In the meantime, the mother had reappeared from her bathroom break and looked worried that her youngest wasn't where she had left him. When she discovered him right next to the pro, she nearly had a heart-attack and looked mortally embarrassed to see her son bothering another customer.

Hikaru decided he should step in before a drama of epic proportions ensued. Touya didn't seem to mind, and the mother snatching her son away would cause a lot more commotion than simply letting everything play out.

He caught her eyes and motioned for her to come closer to the register where they might talk without disturbing either of the two discussing tsumego. "It's alright, your son isn't a bother. He hasn't recognized who he is talking to, so he isn't pestering Touya-sensei for an autograph or something. Your son merely is inquisitive, and he isn't doing any harm. They are merely talking about Go."

She was still hesitant. "Are you sure? Normally, Matsuo is such a shy boy, so I really don't know why he has approached Touya-pro all of a sudden."

Hikaru shrugged. "It seems that the ice cream is very important to your son. He thought Touya-sensei could help, so he asked him to check his answers. Don't worry, if Touya-sensei had minded, he would have told your son he wasn't allowed to help."

She threw an anxious glance at the two heads bent over the paper. "Well, if you think so..."

Smiling, Hikaru calmed her worries. "Yes, I do. And I will also keep an eye on him and send him back when he becomes a nuisance. Alright?"

Finally, the mother relented and bowed deeply. "Thank you very much. I am terribly sorry for causing so much trouble."

Hikaru waved her off. "As I said, don't worry. Just go back and enjoy your ramen before it gets cold."

Reluctantly, she returned to her older son, who was very bored. He had already finished off his ramen and was now letting his gaze wander idly from the TV (Italy vs. Spain) to the group of high school boys, to the couple who were leaning far enough across the table to bump heads, and back again. Apparently, he was quite disinterested in Go. His mother talked to him for a bit, but she continued throwing worried glances at her youngest.

Heading back to his cooking pots, Hikaru kept half an ear on the boy as he had promised, and so he caught the boy's remark about 'Mister' explaining everything just as good as the boy's teacher.

The pro took on an amused expression. "Really? Who is your teacher?"

"That's Umekawa-sensei! He's so good that playing Go is his job, and his classes are really fun!"

"Umekawa 4-dan?" Touya sounded about as incredulous as Hikaru felt, but the boy didn't seem to catch their surprise.

It was lucky that the boy's head was securely attached to his neck because he nodded so enthusiastically. "Wow, you know him? He's really good, isn't he?"

Hikaru almost raised an eyebrow. Was this the same Umekawa who had come in four years ago and thought, just because he was a pro, that the Go special would be too easy for him? If that was the case, then his teaching personality had to be a 180° turnaround from his behavior as a 2-dan.

Touya Kisei looked equally surprised for a moment but turned it into a smile. "I am sure you like him very much. Now, you've still got two wrong answers there, so I think you should work on them. And your mother is waiting for you, too."

Paling, the boy looked at his table and hurriedly got off the stool he was kneeling on. "You're right. Thanks, mister, I really need to go back. Thank you for all your help! Bye, mister!"

And off the boy went. Halfway to the table, he stopped dead in his tracks and went back to get his Go problems, which he had forgotten on the counter. "Hello! Bye again, mister!"

Once the boy was out of hearing range, Hikaru let out the chuckle he had been holding in. "Does that happen to you very often? Someone

not recognizing you, but nonetheless asking you about Go?"

The pro shook his head. "Not here in Japan. But while I was traveling abroad, I had some very strange encounters. Originally, I had intended to distance myself from Go, but the more I ran away, the more often something Go-related crossed my way. And since nobody knew where I was and Westerners are very bad at recognizing Asian features, they didn't recognize me."

"I thought Go wasn't that big outside Asian countries? Then how did you run across it so often?"

"I don't know. While I was in Vienna, there was a Go convention. In Brussels, there was an EGF (2) tournament. In New York, the American Go Association had financed an exhibit of Origins of Go. And every second person I met seemed to be interested in Go."

Hikaru laughed at Touya's comically disgruntled expression. "But I bet that for every Go fanatic you ran across, there were at least five who didn't even know what Go was."

"That, too," the pro admitted. "After a while, it became quite tedious having to explain that, yes, it is indeed possible to make money playing a board game and that, no, Go is not Asian chess."

Ah. Hikaru could see how that would get annoying very soon. "How did you fare with the foreign languages? That must have been quite hard."

Touya shrugged. "In the bigger cities, I always found someone who could understand English. After a while, I didn't have much trouble anymore communicating in English. And Go is a universal language."

"I thought you wanted to get away from Go?"

"'Wanted' being the key word. I think I already told you how well that worked out. But then again, that made me realize I could actually

play just for fun."

Hikaru was a bit taken aback by that. "You never had fun playing Go?"

Startled for a moment, the pro shook his head. "Sorry, that came out wrong. I like playing Go very much, but for my whole life, I've had to take every game very seriously. First because I had to learn, then because I had to prove myself, and then because a pro can't afford to give anything less than his best. It was a novel experience to play Go just for Go's sake."

"... you know, that's not a very good sales pitch for Professional Go," Hikaru mumbled.

Touya merely shrugged. "Hm. Personally, I think being a pro is a job like every other. There always will be times when you regret your choice, but you have chosen it in the first place because there was something that drew you to that profession. You just have to find again what it was you liked about it."

Slowly, Hikaru nodded. That actually sounded very reasonable. "You know," he quipped, "when I was younger, I wanted to become a soccer pro."

"But you became a ramen cook instead."

This stopped Hikaru dead in his tracks. Yes, somewhere down the line, he had given up his dream of becoming a soccer pro and instead gone for ramen. Why? Was that just because his parents hadn't believed he could make it? If he had really wanted to, he supposed he could have gone to a sports high school - he'd had enough talent for that, and even his coach had approached him.

But instead, he had thought nothing of following Sai's suggestion and asked Old Man Mizuhara for an apprenticeship. And he hadn't minded his choice because he loved ramen, and because...

"Because I could play Go." Hikaru mumbled.

"You became a ramen cook because you could play Go?" The surprise was clear in Touya's face.

That sounded a bit idiotic, indeed. "Eh, what I meant was that studying for ramen cook allowed me enough time to play Go. And, I guess I have also found a way of combining both my Go and ramen obsessions. And, voila, Igo Ramen."

He motioned around, since there were Go-related items virtually everywhere.

Touya smiled. "But you still like ramen enough that you don't want to give it up in favor of Go."

Well, that more or less hit the nail on the head. Hikaru had been trying to find arguments against turning pro for nearly a month. But in the end, what everything boiled down to was that one simple truth: he didn't want to give up Igo Ramen. But how had Touya seen to the heart of the matter so easily, when Hikaru had been dithering back and forth for weeks?

Touya didn't seem to mind or notice his momentary speechlessness and continued unhindered. "I told Ogata-san that anyone being at pro-level, but not having chosen to become a pro, had a reason. You know, he refused to believe me. He told me that anyone with a talent like yours had the duty to explore it to its fullest extent. He even showed me the last four games you played with him on the internet. He thinks you could become so much better in a proper environment. Do you know what I saw in those games?"

It was all Hikaru could do to shake his head.

"No? I saw someone who has enough talent that he is still growing, no matter where and how he plays. Contrary to most other amateurs, you haven't yet reached the full potential you can gain as an amateur. And you will continue improving until then. It will be very

slow, a lot slower than your growth would be as a pro, but you will improve if you work on it. You don't need to become a pro right now. The only thing Ogata-san and I agree on is that we don't understand why you hide yourself away on the internet. But I guess there must be a reason for that as well."

Hikaru had to remind himself that, although flies were quite nutritious, he didn't really want to catch them with his mouth. It took quite a while for him to find his speech again. "I... I had a reason, but... I'm not sure it is valid anymore..."

Once again, everything began and ended with Sai. After getting the ghost, he hadn't wanted to be associated with Go. Then, he hadn't wanted to be confused with Sai. And after Sai had left, the incessant need to hide both his and Sai's skills in public had become ingrained so deeply that Hikaru had just continued the way he had always played. Alone, on the internet, and a few teaching games at Heart of Stone.

Was that really how he wanted to continue? Did he really want to hide forever?

Touya Kisei nodded and got up. Without hesitation, he left the exact amount of money for his meal. Their eyes met, and Hikaru almost shuddered at Touya's intense focus. This was the Kisei's expression, not the slightly awkward, socially inept Go-player.

"Should we ever meet across a goban, I will be looking forward to our game."

With those words, Touya Kisei left Igo Ramen. Hikaru almost didn't hear the bells jingle as the door slowly swung shut again. He was still far too frozen both by Touya's unexpected praise, the implications of everything Touya had revealed, and by his sudden glimpse of the Kisei.

Less than an hour later, he closed Igo Ramen early because he just couldn't concentrate.

"Congratulations, Shindou-kun! From now on, you can call yourself a full-fledged Ramen Chef!"

Hikaru smiled at Mizuhara-san. The man was slapping his shoulder with one of his huge, meaty hands, all the while shooting envious looks at his high school diploma.

Hikaru had just survived his graduation ceremony, where Hikaru had finally obtained the proof that those three long years of being a student at the same time as working nearly a full-time job had paid off. After the very stiff and formal event with lots of bowing and boring speeches (he had even fallen asleep once), Hikaru had made a last tour through Okinawa High and said good bye to his teachers and classmates. His mother, who had also attended the ceremony, had waited for him in front of the school gates. Apparently Mizuhara-san had showed up somewhere in the meantime, because they had been chatting happily when Hikaru had come to meet them. Very nice of the old man to come to his graduation.

Excitedly, Hikaru showed them both his new diploma. Hikaru was the proud owner of a certificate attesting him a slew of skills, of which the actual ramen cooking was only a small part. He had a healthy understanding of accounting, business management, advertising, health regulations and, to his horror, English.

Originally, he had thought he could get rid of English once and for all, but both Okinawa High and Mizuhara hadn't allowed him to quit. It was mandatory for all high school students to take English to their senior level, but at least Okinawa High offered special Business English classes. They had been a lot less brain-dead than middle school's texts about Sally and her dog Mandy.

Also, Mizuhara had insisted he take English because, since they were situated very close to central Tokyo, they got a lot of foreign business. And if he wanted to sell anything to foreigners, he'd have to be capable of communicating with them.

So Hikaru had been forced to suffer through another three years of English. At least now he had enough of a working knowledge to hold very basic conversations with non-Japanese people on NetGo. Not enough to really discuss games, but if he really wanted to, he could make himself understood at least. And many Go-related terms didn't need to be translated at all.

To his surprise, Sai had also learned quite a bit of English, more by osmosis than actual effort. Hikaru had used the ghost quite extensively to train his vocabulary - he had compiled vocabulary lists, placed them where only the ghost could read them, and then told Sai to quiz him. As soon as Sai had gotten a hang of the Latin alphabet, it had been quite an effective method of studying.

Well, but now, he'd never have to suffer through a boring English lesson ever again. No more Math, either! No more school!

In the background, he could see Sai sniffing and dabbing his eyes with a tissue he had somehow found in the depths of his wide sleeves. He couldn't hear the ghost over the din of over-excited students and their relatives, but Sai had made it more than clear that he was so very proud of Hikaru being the best cook in his year. Of course, there were only three other students who chose a chef career, but still...

"Congratulations, Hikaru. I'm very proud of you, and your father is, too."

His mother smiled up at him, showing Hikaru just how happy she was. Her traditional upbringing kept her from giving him any more physically oriented affection, and Hikaru was very relieved about that. More than a few of his classmates were being suffocated by their parents at the moment, and he had no intention of joining their ranks.

"Thanks, mom. It's really good to see that all your nagging has paid off." He grinned a lop-sided smile to take the sting out of his words.

"When's dad going to be home? He said he'd take us out for dinner if I got a B average."

As usual, his father was out on a business trip, and Hikaru had forgotten how long it was supposed to last this time.

His mother's smile turned apologetic. "He called last night to say it will be at least one more week before he can come. There was an emergency in the plant in Nanjing, and they need him there until it is fixed. Oh, Hikaru, there is someone else who wants to see you!"

He turned around and followed his mother's gaze, landing on two familiar faces. He exclaimed in surprise, "Grandpa! Akari! What are you doing here? Akari, I thought you still had some exams to sit?"

Akari's visit surprised him the most because he hadn't seen her at all the last few months. She was trying to get into Tokyo University to study economics, and so she'd been completely swamped with cram school, studies, and exam preparations. Additionally, she had decided to go to a different high school, one that fed directly into a lesser university, in case she didn't make Tokyo U. Although they were next-door neighbors, they had hardly seen each other during the last few years between Hikaru's work and her studies.

Her attendance of his graduation ceremony was a welcome surprise, although not in the way his mother (and hers probably, too) hoped. She was a good friend, but there were absolutely no amorous feelings between them. Remembering how she used to throw sand in his face on the playground when they were little could do that. And being forced to attend her tea ceremonies where he was supposed to play-act with some dolls - he still shuddered at those memories. No thanks.

At least their feelings were mutual - she had once told him that he still reminded her of that soccer-obsessed, money hungry video game maniac.

She was clad in her school uniform, and scowled at him fiercely. "Moron! Yesterday was my last entrance exam, and my graduation will be the day after tomorrow (3)! Now that you don't have the excuse of school anymore, you better show up, you hear?"

"But I've still got work!" Hikaru whined.

"Nonsense," Mizuhara-san interjected. "If you have enough time to play at Heart of Stone, you have enough time to go to a pretty girl's graduation."

"Heart of Stone?" Three people asked almost simultaneously with different levels of confusion.

Especially his grandfather, who hadn't gotten a word in yet, was put out. "Hikaru! That is a Go salon! What are you doing there? You never told me you could play Go!"

Oh, yeah, he had never gotten around to telling his grandfather. To think of it - he hadn't told anyone but Mizuhara-san and those old geezers at the salon that he played Go. Everyone looked quite surprised. Well, it seemed that now it was time to own up.

He shrugged deliberately nonchalantly. "Yeah, I've been playing for a bit. How do you know of Heart of Stone?"

"You? Play Go?" Akari apparently couldn't hold in her skepticism anymore. "What brought that on? Didn't you tell me that Go was only something for nerds and old geezers when I joined Haze Middle School's Go club?"

"Hikaru!" Both his mother and his grandfather exclaimed in scandal.

Mizuhara-san merely laughed. "Boys will be boys. What I hear from Kawai-kun, he's actually quite good."

That only made his grandpa madder. He gave Hikaru the evil eye. "You and I, my dear grandson, are going to have a game in the very

close future! That will teach you to hide your skills from me!"

Suddenly, Sai popped up right next to him, tissue and tears exchanged for manic excitement. "Hikaru, Hikaru, you didn't tell me your grandfather could play Go!"

Of course, he should have known that any mention of the word Go would attract the ghost's attention. *Where do you think I got you from? Your goban was in grandpa's shed.*

At the same time, he tried to keep up with the conversation around him. Only long years of practice allowed him to be somewhat coherent with his focus split that much. "You're on! Prepare to get thrashed, old man!"

"Hikaru!" That was his mother, echoed by Sai. "Mind your manners, young man!"

"Sorry, sorry..." He couldn't help the grin that split his face though. It had been a long time since he had seen his grandfather, and an even longer one since the old man had shown so much enthusiasm. When he had been little, he had visited Heihachi quite often, but that had nearly stopped after middle school.

"Oh, and before I forget - grandfather, Akari, this is Mizuhara-san, the man who's tried to beat how to make ramen into my head for the past three years. Mizuhara-san, my grandfather Shindou Heihachi, and my neighbor and childhood-friend Fujisaki Akari. You all know my mom, so there's no need to introduce her."

That earned him a dirty glare from several parties before they exchanged greetings, and Mizuhara-san and grandpa immediately turned to each other to talk about Hikaru, Go, and ramen. Sai seemed torn between listening in on their conversation and hovering over Hikaru.

Hikaru and Akari looked at each other, not quite knowing what to say. It had been more than half a year since they had talked to each

other beyond a hurried greeting when they saw each other on the street. Hikaru had grown so much that Akari's head barely cleared his shoulder, whereas before, they had been the same height.

"So," he cleared his throat, "you graduate on Friday. You already know where you're going afterwards?"

He tried not to mind his mother who had that chaperoning kind of look on her face that said that she was hoping there was a reason for her to be chaperoning them. Akari seemed equally uncomfortable now that it was only the two of them talking.

"Well, I already know that I passed the first two exams for Tokyo U, but the one yesterday was the deciding one. I hope that I did well enough... What about you?"

"Me? I'm definitely not going to any university, thank you very much. I'm going to stay with Mizuhara-san for a while longer as a full-time employee, and then I'm probably going to open my own ramen bar. Got to be sure I make enough profit though; rents here in Tokyo are astronomical."

She laughed. "You tell me! I have looked into getting a dorm room, and that's impossible to afford. The cheapest one I found is about 35,000 yen a month, and that's an hour from the economics building. It's good I can live at home, even if it's going to take two hours to get to university."

"TWO HOURS? Man, that's harsh. I'm really glad that Mizuhara's is only twenty minutes away - on foot. But I guess that when I've got my own shop, I'll try and get a room close by. For now, I'm still saving..."

"Mhm. I guess it takes a lot of capital to start up a business like that. But aren't you kind of young for that?"

Hikaru shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah. That's why I'm going to stay with Mizuhara-san for a while. And he's going to help me, especially

in the beginning. What I need is a good business idea that makes me stand out from other ramen restaurants, so that I can get customers. Something more than simple ramen that you can get at every street corner stall."

"Hm. Maybe something like an internet or manga café (4), only with ramen instead of coffee?"

"Internet Ramen? Manga Ramen? Don't know about that. What about Arcade Ramen? Play as many arcade games as you can before your ramen turns cold?"

"Sounds like Super Mario Ramen: if you beat the level before your ramen gets here, you get it for half the price. The ramen, not the game."

"I know," Hikaru crowed, "Pacman Ramen! Eat the ramen before it eats you! Tetris Ramen! Stack as many ramen bowls as possible! Alien Space Invader Ramen!"

Akari snorted. "That's just like you. Shoot the vegetables before they harm the noodles."

They looked at each other and burst into laughter. Hikaru's mother, who was watching them, seemed a bit lost. It took a while until they calmed down enough to talk again like normal people.

By then, they had drawn the combined attention of Mizuhara-san and Hikaru's grandfather. "What's so funny, you two?"

"Alien Space Invader Ramen." Both Hikaru and Akari burst into laughter again. Hikaru had an especially hard time because Sai was questioning him about Alien Space Invader Ramen in his usual insistent manner.

A joke, he finally managed to think at the ghost, who didn't look as if he understood the whole thing any better with that explanation.

The two older men - Mizuhara-san was only about ten years younger than Hikaru's grandfather - exchanged glances, and then shook their heads simultaneously.

"I don't think that is something we need to understand," the old ramen chef commented. "Hey, Shindou-kun!"

Breathing in deeply, Hikaru tried to suppress his residual snickers. Akari's giggles though made that an exercise in self-control. "What?"

"We have to celebrate your diploma! I'm going to treat all of you to as much ramen as you can eat today!"

"Really?" Hikaru perked up. Even after working at the place for three years, he hadn't gotten tired of Mizuhara's ramen yet. "Awesome! Everyone, come on, you're going to get the best ramen in all of Tokyo!"

"Hikaru! It is four in the afternoon," his mother interrupted.

Hikaru was confused. "So what?"

"It is too early for dinner."

"It's not! It's going to take us at least half an hour to get there, and besides, I skipped lunch today! I'm hungry!"

Mizuhara snorted. "You're always hungry. It's a wonder you haven't turned as round as a ball yet."

"Hey, I'm a growing boy."

"The question is which way you are growing - height or width?"

Hikaru threw his audience, which was quite amused by their banter, a pleading glance. "Help?"

Heihachi sighed. "Well, Mitsuko, I think we can make an exception for today. It's the boy's graduation after all."

Hikaru nodded enthusiastically. "That's right! Now, let's go!"

(1): WAGC: In 2009, 66 nations participated. I assumed that it's not too unbelievable to have that number climb to 76 by 2012.

(2): EGF: European Go Federation

(3): I'm not sure if there's a nation-wide graduation day in Japan - I simply assumed there isn't and that the schools can choose either individually or by prefecture.

(4) manga café: just like internet café; only that you pay for reading manga instead of surfing on the internet.

A/N:

Several people asked about Hikaru's fluctuating strength, and the disparity in his feats of barely beating Arawaki, yet going almost toe-to-toe with Ogata. But, like in so many cases, there are mitigating factors that help keep everything in proportion.

Generally, Hikaru is a tad better than Arawaki Hideo, that year's representative in the WAGC, but he has to struggle against him. Arawaki Hikeo is approximately as strong as the top 3 insei, meaning that Hikaru would probably struggle against them, too. And since there are some insei that have the strength of 3-4p, I'd say Hikaru is at that level approximately in the present.

Someone commented that it's ridiculous to have shodans that have the strength of 3-4p, but a disparity of ranking and actual strength is not too unusual. Since ranks are determined by the number of wins (you need to win 30 games as a 1p to advance to 2p) and not a win/loss ratio (even if you lose 200 games before winning the 30th, you will be promoted to 2p just like the guy who won 30 games in a row), it is not a very accurate measure of strength in the lower ranks.

Now, *deshi* coming within 3.5 moku of *seiji* : I don't think this goes counter to Hikaru being at 3-4p level.

First off, amongst professional ranks, there's only 1/3 - 1/2 stones difference between ranks. That means that Hikaru's about 2 stones weaker than Ogata. Now, in the internet ranking system, a difference of 1 stone means that the stronger player will win 80-90 percent of all games. I'm not sure whether that extends to pro ranks as well, but for the sake of simplicity I assumed so.

Secondly, *seiji* has more or less said it himself: can he give it his all at 3 am in front of a computer with only an hour thinking time each? Ogata is used to having at least 90 min of thinking time, and he used his game against *deshi* as a rebound from losing Kisei to Touya. I think it's excusable that Ogata didn't play at his full strength, giving Hikaru a larger chance of winning. And remember - although Hikaru is coming closer, he hasn't managed to beat Ogata yet.

Another important point though is that I deliberately left Hikaru's strength vague and open to interpretation. He definitely is at the top of the world's amateurs, but it always is hard making a comparison between amateur strength and pro strength. While amateurs can have brilliant games that can rival those of any pro, the pros have more of a continuative strength. After all, they need to play on a very high level every day instead of having a few tournament highlights a year. Go to Sensei's Library to the discussion about amateurs if you want to know more about this.

Well, I hope I cleared up some of the confusion about Hikaru's strength. Thank you very much for all your great reviews, I appreciate them very much. Oh, and the next chapter is going to take a while because it's very closely connected to chapter 10, and I haven't finished ch.10 yet (chapter 11, the last one, is complete though).

Sakiku

Chapter 10

A/N: I'm extremely sorry for the long delay. This was what I was trying to avoid by having almost everything prewritten already. However, the one chapter I didn't already have (Chapter 10) gave me more trouble than I thought it would, and then I realized that I really didn't like the ending in Chapter 11, and that I had to fix that somehow. But now I'm done, and everything should go rather quickly. Thanks for your patience (and of course thanks for all those awesome reviews!)

Give Amarthame your thanks, too, she did some awesome beta work!

Chapter 9

Hikaru narrowed his eyes. What was Black trying to achieve with that hand? On the surface, it read like a good move to try and cut into White's territory along the left side. But beyond that? Black had neglected to completely secure its territory on the lower right, and it was fighting a losing battle on the upper half. Shouldn't Black worry more about that than about trying to gain even more territory?

Hikaru looked up, just to see his opponent smirk at him. He raised an eyebrow at that show of supreme confidence, but maybe... Was there something he had overlooked? Did Black see a path to victory?

His eyes fell back to the Goban, but he still didn't see what Cho-san was so happy about. Yes, the last hand was a good move, but not good enough - it was too weak to really make an impact on the game. Hikaru didn't even have to respond to it immediately. Now, if Black had played a line lower and one or two to the left, that would have been different. But 5-12?

Shaking his head slightly, he set a provocative stone smack-dab into one of Black's unsecured territories on the upper edge. If he played it well, it would gain him another eight to ten moku.

Black immediately moved to fortify its position up there, but within two more hands Hikaru broke through Black's outline and made sure that Black's territory up there was reduced by half. And, judging by Cho-san's expression, that wasn't something his opponent had expected.

Really, Hikaru almost had to snort. Compared to Arawaki-san, Japan's representative at this year's World AmateurGo Championship and who was now in the middle of the pro-exams, Cho-san wasn't half as good. And Cho-san was a finalist for the All Japan Amateur Meijin? Hah, Hikaru's fight during the quarter finals this morning had been twice as interesting as this... farce of a title game. Now, that game against Meihyou-san would have been a good match for the finals! But since the seeding was random, Hikaru guessed that it was entirely possible that the finals were a lot less exciting than previous matches.

And Cho-san still hadn't made a move.

Reminding himself that it was considered impolite to show any annoyance in official matches, Hikaru kept his sigh to himself and tried not to tap his fingers impatiently. He deliberately ignored all the people standing around him and Cho-san and their game, because he hadn't yet gotten used being watched like that. This was his very first tournament, after all, and he was nervous. Or had been - this wasn't a game to get nervous about.

In the beginning, during the first few elimination rounds when there had been over a hundred participants, nobody had really watched anyone but the top contenders for the title. But the longer Hikaru had persevered in that tournament, the more of an audience he had gathered around the goban he played at. Part of the reason was the reduced number of players - every round, half of them got eliminated

- but another part of it was the ease he had defeated his first few opponents with.

To be honest, he was quite glad that, in the beginning, nobody had watched his matches. Since he had played nothing but teaching games in the real world for more years than he cared to count, he had unconsciously fallen into that kind of mentality against his opponents. Thankfully, he had always realized it soon enough to keep anyone from catching on, but that had been... embarrassing. Not to mention that he would have mortally offended his opponents (at least, if someone had played shidou-go with him in an official tournament, Hikaru would have been mortally offended).

But as Hikaru had steadily advanced through the rounds, his audience had increased in numbers. At first, he had told himself that it was no different from all the guys at Heart of Stone who tended to crowd around the goban whenever Hikaru started to explain something. But the atmosphere had been too different. For one, the audience was eerily quiet, contrary to Kimihara and Osawa and everyone else throwing in questions and comments whenever they wanted to. For another, he could feel the incredible tension his audience emitted.

And, of course, those thrice-cursed game-clocks. His opponents repeatedly had to remind him during his first few matches that, after he had made a move, Hikaru should press the clock.

All in all, there had been so many unsettling new experiences that Hikaru had been thoroughly distracted. In the third round, he had almost lost to someone whose skill couldn't have been higher than a 1d or 2d at most. After that disaster, Hikaru had firmly reminded himself that it was about time he got his head back together. If he had continued in that fashion, he surely would have lost not soon afterwards.

By Round 5, he had almost regained his equilibrium, and he had finished the second day with a great game against an old man about his grandfather's age, who played a mean combination of 2-jumps

and peeks to threaten territory everywhere he went. And by the time he had reached Round 6, the quarter finals this morning, he had become used enough to the new atmosphere that he had been able to unleash all his strength upon Meihyou-san, one of the favorite contenders for the title.

And now, in the finals, he felt relaxed enough to treat it like one of his online matches.

Alright, not quite. If his opponent had been better, Hikaru was sure he'd have felt the pressure. If it had been Meihyou-san playing Black, Hikaru was sure he'd have been unsettled by those superior smirks and gestures. But Cho-san lacked both Meihyou-san's skills and his aura. Cho-san just didn't have enough of a presence to force Hikaru to play him with all he had.

Finally, ten hands later, Cho-san resigned and they bowed to each other. "Thank you for the game."

Exhausted from a long day of games, Hikaru rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. "Do you mind if we discuss it later? I think I need to stretch my muscles. I'm a bit unused to sitting for this long."

That was true, too. This year's Amateur Meijin tournament had consisted of eight rounds single-knock-out on three consecutive days, two games on Friday, three on Saturday, and the final three on Sunday. He had found out that most amateur tournaments lasted only two, three days at the most so that people who had work weren't too inconvenienced by it. Thankfully, the thinking time was limited to an hour per person. Otherwise, it would have been impossible to hold so many games on one day.

Most of the time, Hikaru had managed not to use up his thinking time, but many of his opponents had. Not including byou-yomi, that meant that Hikaru had been playing for more than six hours today. Very exhausting, albeit in a completely different way from standing behind his cooking pots at Igo Ramen.

Stretching while he got up, he suddenly realized that he was surrounded on all sides by the crowd that had come to see their game. And they looked very eager to congratulate him and ask him tons of questions.

That was when it finally hit him. He had just won the All Japan Amateur Meijin, hadn't he? The very first tournament he participated in, and already straight through the finals.

He froze. Amateur Meijin was one of the highest amateur titles, too. Man, everyone at Igo Ramen and at Heart of Stone was going to be so mad at him, because he hadn't told anyone he was finally going to play in a real tournament.

Before he could take more than a step away from the Goban, Hikaru was swamped with reporters trying to catch his attention. What was the press doing here? He hadn't seen them before - where had they hidden? Was the Amateur Meijin really that important that at least four different newspapers would want to write an article about it?

"Shindou-san, how does it feel to be All Japan's Amateur Meijin?"

"Shindou-san, can you tell us a bit about yourself? Have you participated in any other amateur tournaments?"

"Shindou-san! You surprised everyone by winning against Meihyou-san in the quarter finals this morning. Do you intend to compete against him for the title as Best Japanese Amateur?"

"Who was your teacher, Shindou-san?"

Hikaru was completely overwhelmed by the multitude of questions. Yes, he had known that someone with his skill level suddenly appearing would cause some commotion, but that it would be this bad? Maybe he should have stayed on the internet... and he was really glad that he hadn't let Sai play for real when he had been younger. If Hikaru appearing out of the blue at his age and his skill-level was such a shock to the Go community, he really didn't want to

think about what would have happened if a twelve-year-old had moved stones with Sai's skills.

Thankfully one of the tournament organizers caught his plight and came to his rescue. The man stepped up next to Hikaru and forced some reporters out of the way. "Please, everyone, step back a bit and let Shindou-san breathe. Shindou-san has just fought three very difficult matches, and he is tired. Please keep your questions short, and one at a time only."

The organizer pointed at one reporter, who then introduced himself as Kobayashi Minato from Mainichi Shinbun. "Shindou-san, you completely surprised everyone by coming out of the blue and winning one of Japan's most prestigious amateur titles. Can you tell us a bit about yourself?"

Hikaru nodded, trying to keep his wits together. He had expected such a question, and he had already decided beforehand how much he was going to tell. What he hadn't expected though was that he'd have to tell it to a reporter instead of some fellow Go player. "Sure. I came into contact with Go for the first time when I was twelve, but I didn't really get interested in it until a few years later. It is no wonder nobody knows anything about me because so far, I have only played on the internet and with my teacher. But two months ago, somebody finally convinced me to try and enter a real tournament, and here I am."

The reporter looked like he wanted to ask another question, but Hikaru followed the organizer's example and picked someone else. She introduced herself as Harumi Fujiko from Supootsu Shinbun. "Who is your teacher? Surely he must have seen your talent and urged you to go public earlier."

"Ah, yes, he certainly did." Hikaru chuckled uneasily, hoping he wouldn't mess up the story he had invented to explain Sai. "When I was younger, he was always pestering me to become an insei, but I absolutely refused. And he couldn't do anything about it because we had never met in person, just over the Internet."

That was a blatant lie, but it was the best explanation he had come up with for Sai's involvement in Hikaru's Go. He knew that he couldn't get away without claiming a teacher - especially since Sai's and his Go showed startling similarities (1), and being self-taught at his level was very implausible. But if he played it right, he could get around the pesky bits of Sai's identity, which many people were still looking for. He could just deny knowing who Sai was in real life, and thus keep up the myth of the NetGo Saint.

To be honest, sometimes it scared him how much of a legend *sai* had become. After the first few months of daily games for *sai*, Hikaru had noticed that the ghost was getting popular. More and more people had popped up with requests to play him, and more and more people had come to watch his games. When he had found out that there were many discussion boards about who *sai* might be, the situation had become increasingly creepy.

At that point of time, Sai's one game a day had turned into one against Hikaru instead of over the Internet quite frequently. But whenever *sai* was online, his unbroken winning streak continued. More and more often, *sai* had to tell people that he wasn't going to give out any personal information; that, no, he wasn't a pro and wasn't going to become one for personal reasons; and, no, he hadn't participated in any amateur tournaments, either, again for personal reasons.

Over the years, interest in *sai* had grown to epic proportions, but Hikaru had managed to keep *sai* anonymous. No matter what the rumors, *sai* had remained silent on all questions that didn't involve the current game being discussed. And that had only spurred more interest in *sai* 's identity.

By the time Sai had moved on nearly eight years ago, he had grown to the status of a living legend. Hikaru suddenly claiming him as a teacher was going to make big waves, but since Ogata had already seen his connection to the Saint of NetGo, there were going to be others who did so, too. This way, he could at least control the revelation a little bit.

As expected, the reporter continued to ask about the identity of the anonymous NetGo player.

"You never met him in person? But surely you must know who he is."

Hikaru shook his head. "No. And I bet there are more people who would like to know who *sai* was. The only thing I know about him is that he must have been terminally ill, because he gave me a short warning before he disappeared eight years ago. Actually, tomorrow will be the anniversary of his death."

"Asano Miyura from Go Weekly. Are you talking about the same *sai* who has been called the Saint of Internet Go? The one who had remained undefeated for six years before he vanished as quickly as he came?"

"Yes." Hikaru could see the excitement on the face of the Go reporter and he got a sinking feeling. Well, it was too late now to take it back...

"This is the first time I've heard about *sai* taking on a student. Did he have any other?"

Hikaru shrugged his shoulders. "Not as far as I know. But, as I said, I don't know who he was in real life, so there is still a chance."

Not wanting to continue this line of questioning, Hikaru once again picked the man from Mainichi Shinbun, hoping he'd start on another topic.

"Thank you, Shindou-san. You mentioned that you have been playing on the internet exclusively so far, just like your teacher. Do you want to reveal which name you have been playing under?"

Hikaru smile wanly. Another secret he wasn't going to be able to hide for long. "I guess it will come out sooner or later. On NetGo and AGS, I go by *deshi* . I just want to ask everyone not to question me too much about *sai* . I don't know much more about him than

everyone else, and I still miss him very much." Pausing a bit, he tried to find a polite way to get out of this question-and-answer session. He'd had enough. "I will answer one more question before I have to go."

He picked an attentive woman who hadn't said anything so far. She didn't look like she knew who either *sai* or *deishi* were, so her question should be safe to answer.

"Maesawa Hitomi from Tokyo Shinbun. What do you do when you aren't playing Go?"

Hikaru had to laugh. Not a question about *sai* and *deishi*, indeed. "Ah, now that would be telling, wouldn't it? Well, then again, I shouldn't have surfaced from the depths of the internet if I wanted to keep hiding. I'm a ramen chef."

That earned him several raised eyebrows. Well, it probably was unusual for a Go player to be cooking ramen for a job, but they'd get over it soon enough.

He bowed towards them. "I am very sorry to cut your questions short, but I am very tired from my games today. Thank you for your patience."

Fortunately, the organizer was quick on the uptake once again and guided him to a door that led to several back-stage rooms. Once the door was closed behind him, Hikaru slumped against it and rubbed his eyes tiredly.

He turned towards the organizer, sighing in relief. "Thanks, man, I had no idea it was going to be like that. I think I should have stayed home today..."

The organizer smiled indulgently. "Ah, but then you wouldn't have become All Japan's Amateur Meijin. I am not very up to date on the Go world, but you took everyone very much by surprise. Congratulations, by the way. The award ceremony will be held in

twenty minutes, and you should prepare yourself for some more questions afterwards. But until then, you can rest here. Nobody should disturb you."

"Thank you very much." Hikaru bowed. "I am very grateful for your help."

Award ceremony? Crap, he had totally forgotten about that. More occasions for those pesky reporters to catch him flat-footed.

The official just nodded. "It was nothing. But if you plan on further participation in amateur tournaments, you should get used to the idea that socializing after the games is also part of the event."

Hikaru sheepishly rubbed his head. "Yeah, I know. It's just - all the attention all of a sudden took me by surprise. This is the first time I've been to an official tournament, and I didn't come here expecting I'd win this thing. I didn't know there would be so many reporters around."

"This is one of the most important Japanese amateur titles after all."

Hikaru smiled wryly. "I'm starting to realize that. Thanks for everything."

"No problem." With a slight bow, the official excused himself and Hikaru was alone in the staff room

He sighed. Just why had he thought that it would be a good idea to participate in amateur tournaments?

Hikaru was filling out tax forms. Who would have thought that being an adult was tied to so much paperwork? He was very close to giving up - who could really understand what all that legalese meant?

And Sai's pacing behind his chair didn't make things easier.

Normally, the ghost would have studied the papers together with him, helping him figure out what all the difficult terms and kanji meant. But lately, Sai had been distant, restless. Very much different from his usual behavior.

ARGH! He buried his head in his hands. He was supposed to concentrate on his tax forms, not worry about Sai!

Finally, the ghost came to a halt next to him. "Hikaru?"

At once Hikaru knew there was something wrong. He had rarely heard the ghost use that questioning, insecure tone. "What's the matter, Sai?" His tax forms could wait.

"Do you think you will be able to set up your own restaurant?"

Was Sai anxious about Hikaru not being able to make it in the future? "Yeah, sure. The Old Man says that he thinks combining Go with ramen is a good idea, too. He says that it might even make people bring their kids there, just to motivate them. Heh, kinda like you did for me..."

Sai smiled one of his very wide smiles that nonetheless seemed... fake. "That is good, Hikaru." Nodding to himself, Sai stared off into emptiness. "Very good."

He had been like that for the past few days, asking strange questions out of the blue and then staring off into nothing. Hikaru grew more and more concerned. "Hey, Sai, what's wrong with you? You've been acting really strange. Do you want to play a game? You know, I've bought that foldable Goban extra for the two of us."

When Sai shook his head distractedly, Hikaru knew that there was something seriously wrong. A Sai who didn't want to play Go was... very rare.

Sai wrung his hands, looking anywhere but at Hikaru. His voice was thin, hesitant, and he mumbled more than he spoke. "Thank you

very much Hikaru, but... but I think I am going to leave soon."

Hikaru gaped. Say what? Sai was leaving? What was going on?

The ghost had turned his face down and hid his mouth with the wide sleeves of his kimono. Nonetheless Hikaru could see the tears in his eyes, and this time, they weren't Sai's usual exaggerated waterworks. They were silent drops making their way down his cheeks, falling to the floor with an inaudible 'plop'.

Hikaru didn't know what scared him more - Sai's silent crying, or his words. "S-Sai? I-I thought you... Why do you want to leave? I promise to let you play all the Go you want!"

Smiling sadly, the ghost shook his head. "Ne, Hikaru, I don't think it's in my control whether I leave or not. I have been feeling a strange pull these last few weeks, and it is getting stronger. At the same time, it feels like I'm... fading away."

Hikaru frowned. "You are fading away? You don't seem any less solid to me than usual."

"But I am!" Wringing his hands, Sai looked at Hikaru pleadingly. "I have to concentrate now to stay here with you. It feels... it feels as if I am just barely holding on anymore to our connection, and as if there was someone calling me all the time. Hikaru, I really think this means that I will be gone soon."

"But why? Why now and not yesterday or last month or next year? And weren't you with Torajirou for his whole life?" Hikaru tried to make sense of Sai's sudden announcement. Yes, Hikaru had realized that Sai had been unusually agitated the past few days, but Sai sometimes had some strange... moods. When Sai was in one of his moods, he tended to question his existence, life in general, the past, the Hand of God, and everything else he came across. This incident though was unlike anything Hikaru had seen in Sai so far.

Sai averted his eyes. "I think my purpose has been fulfilled."

"Your purpose?" Hikaru was very alarmed. "But you haven't reached the Hand of God yet! You have been looking for it for a thousand years, and now that you are in the middle of yet another life, someone suddenly decides to call you back? Your purpose can't have been fulfilled!"

Sai shook his head, smiling wanly. "For a long time, I have doubted that the Hand of God is my true purpose. Judging by the timing of my fading, I have either been sent to help you realize your Go potential, or to tell someone of Torajirou's skills."

Sai seemed to have given it a lot of thought already, so Hikaru tried to find some counter-arguments to calm the ghost down. "But... But I'm still learning so much from you. I am far from your skill-level; I can barely beat you with a 3-stone-handicap. And I bet there still are plenty of games you played with Torajirou. You can't go yet, you hear?"

"Just like the chick eventually leaves its nest, you will have to make your own way in Go, Hikaru. You have reached a point where you can continue growing on your own, and you have found your purpose in life. You don't really need me anymore. And it is not healthy for the living to be so preoccupied with the dead." Sai's smile was as blinding as it was fake. The ghost tried to be as up-beat about it as he could, but Hikaru saw how it tore at him, and how it scared him.

Try as he might, Hikaru was unable to hug the ghost's insubstantial body. "Then what will happen to you?"

Sai's arms closed around him, but Hikaru couldn't feel them. "I don't know. Maybe I will finally be allowed to rest. Maybe I will be given another chance to reach the Hand of God. Or maybe I will guide another aspiring young Go player."

It was clear that Sai believed what he was saying. But Hikaru didn't want to give up that easily. "Why can't you stay? You didn't leave Torajirou, either."

"No, I didn't. It was Torajirou who left me. Hikaru, I don't want you to die in front of my eyes like Torajirou did. This might sound selfish, but I am glad it is me who is going first this time. I don't think I could bear seeing you grow old and sick when I, who should have died a hundred lifetimes ago, continue existing unchanged. Please, Hikaru, live for me."

Hikaru had to fight back his tears. He didn't know how much of his emotions was overspill from Sai's and how much was his own, but the churning roil of them was almost overwhelming. There wasn't anything he could do, was there? Why did this happen so suddenly? How long did Sai still have?

The ghost's face was stained by silent tears as he buried his face in Hikaru's chest. Hikaru wasn't sure, but he thought 'in' was literal. There was just no way that Sai had remembered that Hikaru was supposed to be solid. Not with the way half of Sai's head vanished into Hikaru's shirt.

For a long time they just stood there, staying in their pantomime of a hug but ultimately unable to make physical contact. Finally Hikaru sighed. "Hey, Sai?"

"Hm?"

"Can you tell me a game you played before Torajirou?"

This caused Sai to back away, surprise clear on his face. "Hikaru?"

"I mean, I like seeing the games you played, and if your purpose here is to tell me all about Torajirou's games, I don't want to risk losing you any earlier than I have to. So, can you remember any other games?"

For a long time, Sai was completely frozen, eyes far away. Hikaru was starting to think he had made a mistake in asking, when Sai finally focused back on him, a melancholy expression on his face. "I remember parts of many games, but it was so long ago... There is

only one game I remember completely, and it is not one to be proud of..." Sai trailed off.

At first Hikaru didn't know what the ghost was trying to get at - then it hit him like a brick. "Sorry I asked. I didn't want to bring up bad memories." Of course Sai would remember the last game he played before he drowned himself. "But even if it's only fractions - can you tell me some of the moves you made in those times? I'd like to see how you played a thousand years ago, and if Go has changed a lot in that time."

"Aa. That I can do."

A slight smile was Hikaru's reward, but he could see that the ghost was still deeply troubled beyond the surface.

They spent the evening talking, tax forms completely forgotten. To Hikaru's surprise, less than half of their conversation consisted of Go. Instead, Sai described the way people lived in the past, the way they saw things and, how else could it be, the way that influenced their Go.

It had been a long time since Hikaru had asked Sai about what he had seen living through the ages like he did, and Hikaru was once again amazed how vivid Sai's descriptions were and how he could almost see those pictures in front of his eyes. Hikaru wasn't sure whether that was due to their strange connection - when both Sai and he concentrated on the same game of Go, a ghostly replica of the goban appeared and Sai was able to touch it. So it stood to reason that Sai's influence helped Hikaru's imagination along, too, on some subconscious level.

Hikaru fell asleep with a smile on his face, the TV that he had habitually switched on for Sai to have some entertainment throughout the night, talking softly in the background.

The next morning, Hikaru woke to the sound of his alarm clock. He looked around to see why Sai hadn't woken him exactly two minutes

before the clock went off, but he couldn't find the ghost anywhere. The TV was the only source of continuous talking.

Cold shock ran down Hikaru's back. Sai was gone.

(1) Hikaru's and Sai's Go being so similar: They spent a lot more time together, and Hikaru mainly played against Sai - he didn't have the other insei or pros or Touya to compete with. So I think it's only logical that their style is more similar than in the manga.

A/N: Finally, Hikaru gets off his behind and *does* something instead of just dithering around. I realize that this probably isn't the step most of you have wished for, but... well, I think Hikaru still has plenty of stubbornness left, even after Touya's Insightful Insight last chapter, as *mira mirth* termed it. I realize that it was a bit tacky, and I'll probably go back and fix that when I'm done posting this story.

And yes, despite many complaints, this story will only have 11 chapters. You're lucky that you get 11 at all - without Amarthame's logical argument that I need a chapter to deal with the fall-out from this one, I would have concluded the story in chapter 10!

Sakiku

Chapter 11

A/N: Without Amarthame, this chapter wouldn't exist. I would have skipped straight ahead to the next one. So be thankful to her!

Chapter 10

The wildly jingling door bell alerted Hikaru to his approaching doom.

"Shindou-sensei! How dare you!"

The enraged bellow didn't only draw Hikaru's attention, but the attention of every single one of Igo Ramen's customers, too. There, standing on the other side of the counter, was none other than Osawa-san, with the rest of the Heart of Stone crew slowly trailing in behind him. Fortunately though, they didn't look as incensed as Osawa-san, who had taken it upon himself to succeed Kawai-san's legacy. Instead, the group of old men and one woman (1) piling into Hikaru's diner looked more amused than anything.

Yes, Hikaru knew he should have told them he was going to participate in the Amateur Meijin tournament. But then, they would have come to support him and probably started betting on him, and Hikaru hadn't wanted to have so much commotion around him. It had been a hard decision to go to any tournament at all, a decision he had wanted to make and follow through on his own. Afterwards, he had called his mother and she had congratulated him for winning, but since she didn't know much about Go, the importance of his title had gone completely over her head. If his grandfather had still been alive, he would have been ecstatic.

Just like his grandfather, the Heart of Stone crew knew exactly what he had achieved. And it was time to face the music for daring to keep silent on such an important event. However, he should do some damage limitation before Osawa-san decided to climb over the

counter and rub his knuckles across Hikaru's scalp, just like Kawai-san had always done. Not the climbing, the knuckles.

"How dare I what? Osawa-san, I am working. Please have respect for my customers."

From behind Osawa, Hikaru could see the Owner pushing his way through the Heart of Stone crowd and place a hand on Osawa's shoulder. His smug grin though was not a good sign. "Oh, but Shindou-sensei, we are customers, too. We came in to make sure the quality of your ramen can still match Mizuhara's. After all, it's been at least three years since I've eaten here. I'd like a Go Special miso with lots of leek."

Osawa-san grumbled, "Go Special shouyu, squid. Shindou-sensei, you still have some explaining to do. How could you let us find out via the *newspaper* !" The way he said it made it sound like newspapers were the absolute slowest way of getting information. For heaven's sake, it had only been two days ago that he had won the tournament.

"Now, hold on," Hikaru demanded. "Just when would I have had time to tell you? I've been working all day ever since, and it's not like I told anyone what I was up to."

Judging by Osawa's expression, that didn't make it any better. However, it provided enough time for Kimihara-san to insert himself into the conversation, and the old man let his calming influence play, as usual. "Now, now, I think we should offer congratulations to Shindou-sensei instead of being angry with him. After all, he is the All Japanese Amateur Meijin now. But, Shindou-sensei, we would have appreciated you telling us in person."

Hikaru sheepishly rubbed his head. "Eh, I'm sorry... I didn't want anyone to know I was going to participate, and afterwards I didn't know how to tell you..."

It was Kimihara-san's grandfatherly manner that succeeded in showing Hikaru how childish he had been. He had always felt a close connection to the elderly man, especially after Hikaru's grandfather had died three years ago. Kimihara-san had practically adopted him as a substitute grandson, although Kimihara-san had children and grandchildren of his own. None of them were interested in Go though, so the old man reserved most of his doting nature for Hikaru.

Letting out a bashful laugh, Hikaru motioned towards the Heart of Stone crew. "You know what, all of your orders are going to be on the house today - both as an apology and to celebrate. What do you think?"

The unisonous 'Aye!' was answer enough, and Hikaru was glad to go back to more familiar territory of taking orders and making ramen. It took some rearranging until everyone was seated - Hikaru's diner wasn't really designed to host big groups of people. Apparently, the Owner (probably Osawa-san in reality, as Hikaru suspected) had called everyone together to invade Igo Ramen. Fortunately, they had timed their arrival when business was very slow, so nobody was left standing.

Once everyone was settled with their own bowl, the real interrogation began to the amusement of Igo Ramen's other customers. Free dinner show and all.

"So, Shindou-sensei, how long have you been hiding your skills from us? Are there any other amateur titles we're supposed to be on the lookout for?"

Osawa-san was cut off by a sharp rap to the head, delivered by none other than Takano-san, the only woman in Heart of Stone and Osawa's rival. How two sixty year olds could be so childish, Hikaru'd never understand, but it was part of their charm. "Didn't you read the article? It said that this was the first tournament he's gone to!"

"So?" came the retaliation. "I was asking if he's *going to* participate in more tournaments, not if he *has* ."

"Then, for heaven's sake, say what you mean!"

It was fascinating to watch how little time it took for Osawa-san and Takano-san to drift off into one of their spats that had long ago become part of Heart of Stone's daily entertainment. Those two were the best of friends - as long as they weren't in the same room. As soon as they were within hearing range of each other, they started sniping at each other for the most inane things.

To be honest, Hikaru thought that they were just play-acting because there were times when the two of them got along suspiciously well. They had even reached third place in Tokyo City's Pair Go Championship (2).

Hikaru cleared his throat to get their attention and received twin glares for his efforts. He wasn't very much intimidated though, having long ago gotten used to the pair. There were plenty of bets around Heart of Stone how long it would take the two widowed squabblers to get together. Hikaru had set some money on 'Already together, but trying to hide it'.

He interrupted them before they could start again. "At the moment, I'm not planning anything. To be honest, I'm not sure if I want to go to such a tournament again."

"And why not?" Osawa leaned forward dangerously, pulling an expression that promised lots of pain if Hikaru didn't have a darned good reason. Interestingly enough, Takano was backing him up with an almost identical glare. The rest of the Heart of Stone crew was watching with varying looks of amusement.

Hikaru shrugged a bit nervously. "Eh, do you have any idea how annoying all that publicity is? There have already been quite a few reporters in here, and they're always holding up business and

demanding that I give them an exclusive interview right now, and this is the longest time that the phone has stopped ringing!"

Really, Hikaru was not very happy about that level of attention - but he should have thought about that before winning such a prestigious title out of nowhere. Maybe he should make an exception and include himself in Igo Ramen's pro policy?

A pity that he wouldn't be able to enforce such a policy on the Internet. He hadn't logged on yet since the tournament because, frankly, he was afraid of all those people who were going to pester *deshi* about *sai* despite his explicit wish to the contrary.

Kimihara-san reached out and patted his hand consolingly. "It will wear off as the news gets older. But it's great that you made that jump, Shindou-sensei, now all of us can brag with how good you are."

"And that is supposed to be reassuring?" Hikaru threw him a doubtful glance. "You've been bragging enough as it was."

The old grandfatherly man actually had the audacity to smirk. "Yes, but now they will at least believe us."

"Ah, that reminds me, Shindou-sensei," the Owner interrupted with a honey-sweet voice - before donning a frighteningly scary expression. "Just why didn't you mention anything about Heart of Stone to the press? Have you forgotten about us already, now that you have your own claim to fame?"

Honestly surprised, Hikaru shook his head in dismay. "No, no, it's nothing like that! But if I had told them, they'd be on the lookout for me at the club, too, and it's bad enough that they're coming to Igo Ramen all the time. I just didn't want to inconvenience you, especially since I didn't tell you I was going to participate in the first place."

A round of chuckles went through Igo Ramen before the Owner's expression dissolved into a lopsided smile. "Ah, but we could do with some publicity at Heart of Stone. Maybe we'd even get some more regulars out of it."

"You actually *want* to deal with that media circus?" Hikaru stared at him incredulously. "Then fine, I'll tell the next one who asks, and maybe that will even get some attention off Igo Ramen if they know they can find me somewhere else. Heck, maybe you'll be able to scare some of them off for me?" he asked hopefully.

A new round of laughter washed through the diner, and Hikaru knew he had been forgiven.

The rest of the evening passed with amicable chatter, heated discussions about Go, solving tsumego (which the Heart of Stone crowd did with the same enthusiasm as elementary school kids), requests to recreate his tournament games on the magnetic goban, and occasionally serving other Igo Ramen customers.

When he closed shop at half past eleven, he was in such a good mood that he decided to brave the horrors of NetGo before he lost his courage. It couldn't be worse than half a Go Salon's worth of people invading Igo Ramen and asking uncomfortable questions, could it?

As it turned out, yes it could. His e-mail inbox was overflowing with nearly a hundred messages from NetGo and AGS, ranging from congratulations to questions about *sai*, to requests for games, to outright love letters (to both *deshi* and *sai*). After reading the tenth such message, he resorted to merely skimming over headers instead of opening them. About seventy emails down the line, there was an official one from the NetGo server, stating that, due to the current situation, they had temporarily stopped relaying all messages to him, and that he should contact an admin for further procedures. After that, there were several more private messages from AGS before the Asian Go server, too, offered him a similar deal.

He was just glad that nobody had access to his email address directly - it was bad enough to see all this stuff relayed through the Go servers. Just why did everyone have to be so nosy? With *sai* 's account back then, he had simply turned off the option of messaging him privately. Should he do the same for *deshi* ? Well, it was worth thinking about at least.

A message from NetGo, the second to last before NetGo stopped relaying them, caught his attention. At least the subject did: *about time*

Curious, he opened it. It was very short and to the point.

So it takes the effort of several titleholders to get you moving? And even then, you take only the tiniest of steps. Although that kind of tenacity is an asset in your games, it is very unbecoming everywhere else. I will not waste my time butting my head against such a wall. If you wish to play me again, it will be your shodan match.

Signed: *seiji* .

Hikaru shook his head in exasperation, ready to take up the veiled challenge. He should have expected something like that from the pro. But to set such an ultimatum? He thought he had gotten through to Ogata when the man had come to Igo Ramen. He thought he had made it clear that there did exist some people who weren't pros, who had no intention of turning pro, but who were just as serious about Go as any pro.

Apparently though, Ogata Tengen hadn't gotten the message. Well, Hikaru definitely wasn't going to bow to his every whim like that. After all, it wasn't like there weren't any other good players out there, was it?

Shaking his head, he logged on to NetGo, ready to brave the masses.

Listlessly, Hikaru stared at the computer screen in front of him. It had been almost three months that Sai had vanished, and he still couldn't bring himself to put his heart into his Go. And then again, he also couldn't bring himself to completely stay away from it, either.

After he had reluctantly accepted that Sai was indeed gone (the ghost hadn't showed up for three days straight), Hikaru had coerced Kawai into taking him to Innoshima, Shuusaku's birth place. He didn't know what he had hoped to find there - Sai? Kuwabara Torajirou, the man who had played so brilliantly against Sai in that one unfinished game?

Whatever it was, he hadn't been so lucky. Instead, he had caught a cold and been abducted into a Go salon in Innoshima. A strange man who claimed to have several international amateur titles had challenged him to a game, which Hikaru had lost after struggling for almost two hours. He just hadn't been able to find a good rhythm, and the man had been good. Very, very good.

He thought that the guy might be *satou*, one of the best 7d on NetGo, but he hadn't seen enough of *satou* 's games to be sure. It was very rare that *satou* was online at the times Hikaru was, and Hikaru wasn't very enthusiastic in looking for him. He didn't even know why he was looking at all, to be honest. He certainly wasn't planning on demanding a rematch.

A random challenge popped up on his computer screen. Some unranked 5k wanted a match. An hour of thinking time? Although such a large amount of time wasn't unheard of in online matches, it was very rare. Did that guy even know what he was getting himself into?

Without much enthusiasm, he accepted. Maybe the guy would turn out amusing enough to keep him from thinking about Sai for some time.

Both Old Man Mizuhara and the guys at Heart of Stone had quickly realized that there was something wrong with Hikaru. He was listless

all day long, and not even Kawai's antics could get him to smile. Mizuhara had offered to give him a week off if he felt under the weather, but Hikaru had refused. Having something - anything - to do was better than sitting at home and moping.

He had tried explaining his situation to them, but he couldn't come out and say that the ghost, who had stuck to his side day and night for almost seven years, was gone. He couldn't tell them that he had lost a friend, a mentor, a confidant, someone who had been so close that they had shared emotions. He couldn't tell them that everywhere he went, something reminded him of Sai and his unending questions about the modern world.

Instead, he had been forced to make up a story about how the guy who had taught him Go over the Internet was gone. They had understood that he needed to grieve, but they hadn't been able to imagine just how deep their connection had gone.

His mother and his grandfather had taken a bit longer to realize he was down, and he'd had the same problems trying to explain it to them. His grandfather had been a bit put out with him because Hikaru had refused to play against him, the game he had promised his grandfather ever since his graduation. Thankfully, the old man had seen how truly agonizing the thought had been for him and hadn't pressed matters further. Still, Hikaru had begun avoiding him to prevent a repeat incident.

Hikaru had learned to pretend that everything was ok, or at least hide the full extent of his feelings. When he was alone in his room though, there was no need to keep up a facade anymore. In the beginning, he had cried a lot, which in and of itself was a reminder of Sai because the ghost had shown him that the world didn't end when a man shed tears.

Nowadays, he moodily tried to distract himself from reality. He had tried playing all those computer games he had been so fond of during middle school, but none of them could keep his attention. He had never realized just how... trivial and pointless they were. Maybe

it was because he had matured. Maybe it was because he hadn't played computer games for years. Maybe it was because he only had kiddie stuff.

But in the end, he always logged onto NetGo. There, he listlessly perused the names of people online and the games available, and occasionally he watched or played one. None of them had been able to grab his attention though.

That was, until he looked at the game he was currently playing and realized that the unranked 5k didn't only know what he was doing, but was also damn good at it. They were about twenty hands into their game, and Hikaru could already see that his black stones were in serious danger of being overwhelmed by the sheer pressure White exuded.

He had been playing too mindlessly with too little initiative. White had more or less pushed him wherever it wanted, and he had done nothing to resist.

Frowning at such an inexcusable lack of attention, Hikaru started retaliating with several aggressive attacks on White's right corner. With as much territory as he had given away earlier, he couldn't afford to pull his punches now.

To his dismay though, White kept right up with him and even increased the pressure until the situation was just like before - Hikaru on the losing side. Just what the heck was that guy? If that was a 5k, he'd eat his shoe.

Gritting his teeth, he changed tactics once again and went for consolidating the territory he already had. If he had a secure base, he could launch attacks from there without having to fear being invaded from the back. But White saw right through him and used the time to claim even more territory.

Sixty hands into the game, Hikaru simply stopped and closed his eyes. If he continued playing like that, he should resign right then

and there because there was just no chance of him winning. So far, he had only been reacting, falling right for White's manipulations. If Sai saw him play like that, the ghost would scold him for days.

When he opened his eyes again, determination burned in them. There was no way he was going to roll over and die quietly. If this *seiji* wanted to win, he'd have to bloody well work for it.

Looking at the board with new eyes, Hikaru couldn't help but wince. What exactly had he been thinking playing like that? Well, he guessed the problem was that he hadn't been thinking, period. But that was over now. With determination he began a counterattack, one that might not seem like one at first but which he hoped was going to turn the flow of the game in his favor.

And *seiji* played along. For the next few hands, Hikaru continued to place stones in a similar pattern to how he had been playing up to then, distracted and overly aggressive. Slowly, the trap took on form. The next two hands were crucial - if *seiji* didn't see their hidden purpose, Hikaru would be able to reclaim a lot of influence on the left side, and he would be back in the game again.

A seemingly weak response to White's extension at 6-9, where he pretended not to see how that extension was starting to encroach on his territory at the top. Good. One more hand to go, and he'd be set.

Clenching and unclenching his fists, he tried to keep his tension in check. He was staring at the computer screen so hard that the light had more or less burned the image of the game into his retinas. This visual aid wasn't really necessary though because he would be able to reconstruct the game from the very beginning, and he was able to tell the position of every single stone without looking. Remnants of playing many games of blind Go against Sai.

If this trap went off, it would be his most elaborate and most intricate one to date.

Finally, White made its move and Hikaru almost fell off his chair. What the...

Incredulously, Hikaru stared at the innocent-looking white stone that not only rendered his trap useless with one move, but also turned it against him. What should have become a very subtle net blocking off every possible escape route, had turned into a meaningless collection of stones in less than favorable positions.

How had he missed this? Why hadn't he seen this way out of the trap? Had he focused too much on his seemingly ingenious plan to notice a very basic flaw?

But no. Looking as deeply into the game as he could, he saw how *seiji* had subtly undermined his intentions during the previous three hands, and how the last stone only was the crowning finale to an even more ingenious way out of an ingenious trap.

No, *seiji* was no 5k, probably not a 7d, either. The guy hadn't even taken a lot of thinking time to come up with his strategy. Such an ease with reading difficult situations could only come from hours upon hours of study and practice against highlevel opponents. Even compared to most insei Hikaru had played, *seiji* was on a completely different level. He really doubted that *seiji* was anything but a pro.

For a few more hands he tried to salvage the situation, but he had wasted too many turns building the trap. And when it had been disarmed, it had turned into a heap of useless stones that would have been better spent elsewhere. Part of it, he could use to stake some claim on the left-hand side, but far from the dimensions he needed to turn the game around. And *seiji* was still upping the pressure.

Sighing, he hit the 'resign' button. There was no way he could win this, and it wasn't good manners to drag out a lost game to the very last stone. But it was a pity - he thought he hadn't seen *seiji* 's entire strength yet. If only he hadn't played so badly at the beginning...

-Thank you for the game. You are an incredible player.- He wrote, hoping to strike up a conversation. *seiji* intrigued him.

-You could be better. Don't play with your head in the clouds.-

Hikaru stared at that answer, mouth gaping. It was true, but did *seiji* have to say it in such a rude way? If *seiji* really was a pro, then he couldn't be one with many teaching games - his bedside manner was atrocious. Honestly, who said stuff to an opponent they just defeated? *-And you could be more polite. I know it was a mistake not to pay attention at first; you don't have to rub it in.-*

-Even if you had paid attention, I would have won. Is this the strength of current insei?-

Ego much? Hikaru couldn't believe *seiji* 's arrogance, although it probably was justified. Judging by the skills White had shown during that game, *seiji* probably would be able to take him when Hikaru played full strength. But what was that mention of insei? Was *seiji* an outsider hoping to take this year's pro exam? Hikaru doubted it because he hadn't yet met anyone of *seiji* 's strength. Not even that amateur title holder in Innoshima had come close to this.

-I am not an insei, if that is what you are asking. mooney91 is one though.-

-He as good as you?-

-She. 7d.- Honestly, why did people automatically assume all good Go players were male? Well, he shouldn't say anything since he had already decided that *seiji* was male, too, but at least Seiji was a more or less common first name for boys.

-I wasn't asking what rank she has.-

seiji was starting to get on his nerves. Who did that guy think he was? *-If you're so interested in her, look up her stats yourself.-*

-I am not interested in her. -

Hikaru almost growled. *-Then don't keep bothering me about her!-*

-You are the one who jumped to that conclusion. Pay attention from the very beginning, and you might actually be able to provide a decent challenge.-

Before Hikaru could even think of a suitably biting reply, *seiji* had already logged off. The nerve of that guy! Hikaru was still sitting there, gnashing his teeth. He'd show that *seiji* what he was capable of!

Frantically typing into his search engine, he began to plot his revenge. First, he'd find out just who *seiji* was, and then he could go on planning his next moves...

(1) one woman and many men at Heart of Stone: The impression I got from the anime was that playing Go in Go salons is mainly reserved for men. Older women seem to go to Go classes or meet at home, but rarely go to Go salons. Not sure whether that's because serious Go seems to be mainly a game for men, or because the older generation in Japan still has some traditional hang-ups about delicate women being supposed to stay away from men and 'rough' places like Go salons. Even in Touya's very up-scale joint (which can't be called rough in any way), I didn't see any older women playing (and with 'older', I mean grandma age...)

(2) Pair Go: Go, where there isn't one player per side but a male-female pair (thus the name). Without handicap stones, the normal rotation is as follows: black-female, white-female, black-male, white-male. The partners aren't allowed to communicate their strategies with each other in any way during the match- a violation of the rules brings instant forfeit. More info is here: www.pairgo.or.jp/setumei/rule.htm.

A/N: Ah, the common theme in this chapter seems to be Ogata challenging Hikaru. To be honest, that surprised me a bit - it just turned out that way when I was writing it. After all, Ogata was a deciding factor in Hikaru's past, so why not have him fulfill a similar role in the present (although not quite the way he intended...)? Sorry if Hikaru's first match against Ogata in the past was kind of a predictable choice, but I needed to show the turning point that got him out of his funk. As Amarthame said, it's not a good idea to have him still depressed during the conclusion of the story.

For all Touya supporters: No, I haven't forgotten about him. I just don't think that he would deem it necessary to immediately hound Hikaru again. Hikaru might get a smile and a nod from him the next time they meet, but Akira would wait and see how the situation developed before taking any further measures.

Well, almost done. The last chapter should be out by tomorrow at the latest.

Sakiku

Chapter 12

A/N: Last but not least - Many thanks to Amarthame for making this story possible the way it is.

Chapter 11

For the first time in his life, Hikaru's nerves were showing during a game of Go. It was strange - he had just managed to get through four consecutive days of games against the world's top amateur players. And he hadn't had any problems then, finally winning the title of World Amateur Go Champion (1) yesterday. But now on the fifth day, when everything was over already, he grew nervous in a way he had never been before or during a game.

Well, it might be because he was facing Touya Kisei across the goban.

It wasn't a game that would influence any rating or any title. It was one of many games that pros were playing against amateurs in the large tournament hall in Mayabeshima. The fifth and last day of the WAGC was there for the pros, who had refereed the eight tournament rounds, to mingle amongst the amateurs. It was supposed to be an opportunity for everyone to get to know the pros' human side, and to see what they were really like across the Goban instead of their teaching personalities.

And the game Touya Kisei was currently playing with him definitely was no teaching game. Why though was Hikaru almost buckling under the weight of it? Shouldn't this be a welcome challenge?

Hikaru hadn't felt pressured like that since his last game against *seiji* more than a year ago. That game had been the start of it all, of a month of various people trying to convince him to turn pro. And *seiji* had been one of the most adamant. Ogata Tengen had even gone

so far as to state an ultimatum after Hikaru's first amateur tournament. Either Hikaru became pro or *seiji* wouldn't play with him anymore

Although he hadn't thought so at first, Hikaru was realizing more and more just how heavy a blow *seiji* had dealt him there, because Hikaru had no intention of turning pro anytime soon. *seiji* was an opponent that Hikaru truly looked up to. After Sai's disappearance, *seiji* had somehow taken the ghost's spot as a goal to strive for. *seiji* had become his motivation to continue and improve his Go.

seiji had almost become a life-line during those first few, hard months after Sai's disappearance.

In the beginning, he had just laughed it off, not willing to acknowledge *seiji* 's ultimatum. Actually, he had flat-out refused to give in to those unreasonable demands. But the longer *seiji* stayed adamant, the more Hikaru realized just how much he missed the incredible challenge the pro had provided.

That was, until Touya Kisei had asked to play him less than an hour ago.

Touya Kisei's style was different from Ogata Tengen's, less... less edgy and less prickly. On the surface, Touya's play was very straightforward, but there was a tricky undertow that was very difficult to read. Hikaru was holding on by the skin of his teeth, struggling to find those impossible hands *deshi*, and lately Hikaru, too, had become famous for.

Hikaru knew he had a knack for spotting moves that led to paths which were so convoluted that most of his opponents failed to catch on until it was far too late. Touya though... The Kisei had managed to circumvent most traps at a point when they could still be eroded from beneath, and he even managed to turn one or two against Hikaru. And Hikaru wasn't doing well in other areas of the game, either.

He didn't dare look beyond the square plane of the goban because Touya's stoic and absolutely calm face threatened to destroy the rest of his confidence. Gritting his teeth, he closed his eyes for a moment.

What was he doing? Why couldn't he just play the Kisei like he had played everyone else before? Why did he let his nerves influence him so much? After all, he knew he had played against Ogata Tengen before, and he hadn't had any problems facing the other title-holder over the Net.

He had to calm down and concentrate on the board. Not on the Kisei, not on why Touya had challenged him, not on how much this game meant to him. It was just him and the board, and until the battle was decided nothing else mattered.

Sai had taught him better than to lose focus like that.

When he opened his eyes again, the stones hadn't moved from their places. They were still in early middle game, and he wasn't holding up well against Touya Kisei's attacks, having been forced to concede a lot of territory on several occasions. It was still too early to tell, but Hikaru thought that the gap between the two of them was about 10 moku, and it was threatening to widen even more. At least it wasn't the complete disaster his very first game against *seiji* had been...

What if he tried to split that loose border group at the lower edge? If he managed to exert some influence there, it would strengthen his group directly above and Hikaru could go into the battle for the center with some support from the lower left and the corner.

He carefully initiated a ko-fight that he had no intention of winning, in order to disguise that his invasion at the lower edge was anything more than simple ko-threats. And for five hands, Touya played along.

Then, on the sixth hand, Touya abandoned the ko-fight and instead went after one of Hikaru's groups on the lower right side.

For several long minutes, Hikaru was completely perplexed. He couldn't see what Touya would gain from such an attack. The group was alive already and connected to...

Hikaru suddenly looked up. Why was Touya going after that connection? The Kisei's face didn't give anything away. Was Touya simply trying to isolate that group, or was that move part of a much more intricate plan?

Carefully, Hikaru continued playing and, gradually, he saw his efforts pay off. And Touya Kisei reacted by pushing even harder, which spurred Hikaru to new heights. The farther the game progressed, the more involved the Kisei seemed to become, so much that it was even noticeable through his stoic façade.

But in the end, Hikaru's bad play in the beginning proved to be his downfall.

Hikaru bowed his head in defeat. Try as he might, he couldn't see a way to close the gap that had shrunk to seven moku between them. "I have nothing."

"Thank you for the game," they both mumbled at the same time, still staring at the board. It was a good game, but not a brilliant one due to Hikaru taking so long to get into it.

Finally, Touya raised his head. "This is your first time playing a higher dan face to face, isn't it?"

"Yes." After having played so many games against other amateurs, he hadn't thought that there was such a huge difference between playing face-to-face and playing over the Internet.

Until now, he had gone into his Real-Life games with a relaxed attitude and had come out of them just as relaxed. Sure, there were a few people who had come close to defeating him. And Hikaru had lost to Meihyou-san in the finals of the Tokyo City Championship, but

Hikaru had caught some kind of stomach bug and hadn't been able to concentrate properly on that day.

Hikaru always gave it his all in every game. But he hadn't seen why he couldn't have played those games over the Internet just as well.

Now though... After facing that seemingly insurmountable wall of a presence that Touya Kisei radiated, he knew what the difference was. He had seen how much Touya's mere existence had influenced his game.

Somehow, that reminded Hikaru of Sai.

Not the Sai who goofed around or who played shidou-go with him. No, Hikaru was reminded of the few games they had played where both of them had been absolutely serious.

On the other hand, it had been quite unlike playing Sai, too. Throughout their years together, Hikaru had become so accustomed to Sai's Go that, half of the time, he had been able to predict Sai's next moves (finding a counter for them had been a different matter however). Touya Kisei though was a new opponent whose style Hikaru had had to get used to first. Although Hikaru had studied Touya's kifus before and would be able to recognize the pro's style just about anywhere, it was a completely different matter to be faced with that kind of Go.

And, well, Hikaru couldn't really deny that he had a slight case of hero-worship. Try as he might, he had to admire the titleholder's sheer strength and brilliance.

"You have once again become stronger," the man stated calmly.

Hikaru did his best not to start preening at Touya's praise. "Eh, I have? I don't think my play at the beginning deserves that much."

"But you managed to pull yourself together and play a great game in the end. Tell me, do you remember what I told you a year ago?" The

Kisei's stare was penetrating.

Hikaru was so focused on him that he didn't notice the audience that had gathered during their game and continued lingering and discussing their strategies. Over the course of more than 10 amateur tournaments during the past year, Hikaru had learned to ignore everything but the board and his opponent.

And of course Hikaru still remembered what Touya Kisei had told him. The pro had left a lasting impression by showing so much understanding for Hikaru's situation. It had been Touya Kisei who had made Hikaru acknowledge that, first and foremost, it was Hikaru who needed to be happy with his decision of whether to turn pro or not. And if cooking ramen was so important to him, then the pro-world had to come second.

But Hikaru couldn't imagine why Touya would still remember that conversation.

Contrary to *seiji*'s refusal to play Hikaru again, Touya Kisei hadn't interrupted his routine of coming to Igo Ramen once a month. But the pro had never given any signs that he saw Hikaru as anything else than the strange, Go-obsessed ramen chef he was. Touya had acted as if that talk had never happened, and so Hikaru had gone back to their old routine of giving the pro a conversation partner who could talk about things other than Go and, if necessary, carry on the conversation alone.

But if Touya had remembered all that time, why did it take so long for him to mention it once again? For that matter, why did he mention it *now* ?

Hikaru nodded, curious as to what the pro was trying to get at. "Yes, I remember. It's the reason I appeared before the public with my Go. I don't think I've yet had the opportunity to thank you for that."

A slight smile tilted Touya's lips upwards. "Ah. Still in love with ramen, I see. So, how has your love for Go come along? Tell me,

have you heard of the Hand of God?"

Hikaru turned pale. The 'Hand of God' was an expression he had never expected to hear again, not even from a Go player. Sai had been chasing after it until his death - disappearance, whatever. But Hikaru had thought that it was just an expression Sai had coined. He certainly had never heard anything about a Hand of God anywhere else. How did Touya know about it? Was it more well-known than Hikaru had thought? Or was it merely a coincidence, a case of two different things having the same label?

Carefully he asked, "And what is this Hand of God to you?"

Touya frowned slightly, probably reading Hikaru's unease. "The Hand of God is a concept players have been striving for for centuries. It is the one perfect move, the ultimate goal to aim for with every hand. But you already seem familiar with it."

Hikaru couldn't do anything but nod. "Yes. Until the day he died, my teacher had been chasing after it. But since he was quite... old-fashioned, I didn't know if you were talking about the same concept."

For the first time, Touya seemed surprised. "Your teacher knew of the Hand of God? He must have been a remarkable man. So, if he was chasing after kami no itte, what is your reason to get stronger? You know, you are nearing a point at which you need to make a decision. You only have three more years that you can take the exam. Should you ever decide to do so, there are people waiting for you."

The pro tilted his head slightly to the right and stared intently at something that was behind Hikaru. When he followed Touya's gaze, Hikaru almost swallowed his tongue upon seeing Ogata Tengen's retreating back cutting through the audience that had assembled around their goban.

What the...?

What in the world was Ogata 9-dan doing here? Ogata hadn't been one of the pros overseeing the tournament, and Hikaru was quite sure he would have spotted that eye-catching white suit if he had been there for any other reason during the past four days. No, the pro must have arrived this morning.

And had Ogata Tengen just been watching their game? He thought *seiji* didn't want to have anything to do with him unless he turned pro?

Hikaru turned back and looked at Touya incredulously. The pieces fit together to paint a mind-boggling picture, but Hikaru was loath to even consider such a self-centered view.

Touya nodded in response. Hikaru didn't know whether that was to say, yes, Ogata Tengen was really looking forward to playing him as a pro or, yes, Ogata Tengen had indeed come to Mayabeshima to see the game between Hikaru and Touya.

As far as Hikaru knew, Mayabeshima was in the middle of nowhere (the WAGC organizers tried to show the participants Japan's more rural countryside), so Ogata couldn't have appeared just because 'he was in the vicinity'. Ogata must have come solely for the WAGC.

But why did a pro care about an amateur tournament when he wasn't scheduled for it by the Nihon Ki-in?

No. Hikaru firmly decided that he wasn't going to think about that anymore, lest he get a big head. There probably were plenty of reasons for Ogata's presence, none of them concerning Hikaru.

"Think about it," the Kisei encouraged. "You have the talent. But for the last step, talent isn't enough. You need to have a purpose. Find the purpose of your Go, and then decide how you can realize it best in your future. Thank you for the game."

Hikaru automatically repeated the phrase, but his mind was whirring frantically. Just like last time, Touya Kisei had hit the nail on the

head. Hikaru's Go was aimless. Why was he playing at all?

Because he was good at it? Not much of a reason.

Because he didn't have any other hobbies? That was sad but true. If he didn't have Go to fill his evenings with, he would be quite bored.

Because playing Go every day had become an ingrained habit, some leftover remnants from Sai's days once again? Because it was something to remind him of Sai?

Well, at least it was something to fill the hole Sai had left behind. Hikaru had spent nearly three months in a depressed haze before he had accidentally stumbled across *seiji*, and *seiji* had quickly taken Sai's spot of being someone he could test his strength against. Hikaru had burned with a desire to show *seiji* that he could do better.

Was that the reason for his Go? To chase after Sai substitutes in a futile attempt to reach the ghost? But what would happen if he finally caught up with those substitutes? Did he really want to catch up at all? And, most importantly, was he able to do that with the way he was playing now?

He missed Touya Kisei getting up and moving away from their goban, and the rest of the day Hikaru walked around in a daze. He tried to keep his mind in the present, especially for those interviews he had to give as the new WAG Champion, but he kept drifting off to the Kisei's words.

After his somewhat unprepared start at last year's Amateur Meijin competition, he had quickly found a routine of dealing with reporters and the occasional TV crew. His easy-going nature made talking to them less than the chore it seemed to be for other players, and he had quickly gotten the hang of telling them exactly what they wanted to hear without giving away his private life.

Thankfully he hadn't made acquaintance yet with any really vile examples of that profession, those who took every word one said

and turned them into as negative a light as possible, just to have one more shocking headline.

Despite being able to deal with the press easily now, it was good that he had finally followed Kimihara-san's advice and hired Igo Ramen's very first fulltime-employee. After winning the title today, he could practically bet that there would be plenty of reporters showing up in his diner, and although he had become good at getting rid of them as quickly as possible, it still took time. And without Yamaguchi-san to run the restaurant in his absence, a five-day-event like the WAGC would have cut a painful hole into Igo Ramen's finances.

After Hikaru's time with Old Mizuhara, the man had discovered his liking for taking on apprentices, and Yamaguchi was one of the generation that had just finished at Mizuhara's but weren't quite ready yet to start up their own business. Honestly, with the way things were going, Old Man Mizuhara would have to open another stall to have enough work for all his apprentices, current and former. At least Hikaru knew who to turn to for well-trained ramen chefs, should he need some more employees.

Hm, maybe he should look into getting an ex-insei as cashier, or at least someone who had a reasonable grasp on Go? Yamaguchi-san was a nice guy, and he really knew how to cook. However, both of them had decided that it would be better to offer the Go Special only on days Hikaru was in. Yamaguchi-san didn't know a thing about Go, and even if Hikaru clearly labeled everything and provided answer sheets, Yamaguchi wouldn't be able to deal with any questions that might arise.

He'd have to see how things turned out.

However, he kept getting distracted by mulling over the Kisei's words. Glances at the pro didn't reveal anything else, and Ogata Tengen had vanished as quickly as he had appeared. Hikaru mingled amongst the other amateurs, trying half-heartedly to break the language barrier of two people of different tongues trying to communicate in a third, since hardly any of the foreigners spoke

Japanese well enough to hold a decent conversation. Hikaru was surprised by how much English he still remembered from school, and how much came back after only a short period of time.

The event ended before he even knew it. On his flight back to Tokyo, he finally had enough time to truly think about Touya's question. What purpose did his Go have? Or did it even have one?

Yes, at first glance, he had plenty of reasons. To teach others the love of the game (realized both in Igo Ramen and Heart of Stone), to have fun, to relax in the evening, to test himself against other people.

But underneath the underneath? What did Go truly mean to him?

Up until a year ago, he had to admit, he had merely tried to keep up the status quo he had achieved with Sai. During the days he had cooked ramen, and at night he had played on the internet. He had occasionally given teaching games at Heart of Stone, but he had never let on to his strength in the real world.

The only difference to his final years with Sai was that Hikaru had played all the games by himself, and that he'd had to keep up with the Go world on his own instead of absorbing that kind of information through Sai's excited babble. Otherwise, nothing had changed at all until nearly a year ago, when he had finally decided to participate in amateur tournaments.

But had that really changed anything?

He had continued playing in those tournaments like he had played on the Net: relaxed and not going all out most of the time. He kept on playing Go like he always had after Sai's death, wading through opponents that were less and less challenging, in order to find the few that still demanded his whole attention.

Why did his past feel so empty all of a sudden? The only truly memorable games of the last eight years had been those against *seiji*, maybe one against Arawaki-san, and that single one against

Touya Kisei earlier that day. There had been some kind of... spark in them. He had felt really alive then, as if using every last percentage of his brain power for the very first time. Those games had spurred him on, forcing him to evolve to new heights in order to match his opponent. Those were games he kept analyzing, kept agonizing over if a single different hand might have been able to make a difference, kept trying to find other paths to victory. Those were games that went far beyond being mere games.

Sure, he remembered plenty of exciting games against other people, both on the Internet and in tournaments. His sixth round two days ago, for example, against the Korean representative in the WAGC. 19-year-old Pak Il-Sung's style had reminded him a bit of *KingofGo* on the Asian Go Server AGS. Not as arrogant, but nonetheless some startling similarities.

A few years ago, Hikaru'd had the pleasure of being flattened by *KingofGo* several times in a row - which was no wonder because a bit of research amongst Korean pro-kifu had turned up that the guy was none other than Ko Yeong-Ha, Korea's equivalent to Touya Akira. He wondered what it was with pros disguising themselves as amateurs on the Internet and displaying egos that were big enough for two.

Pak Il-Sung's Go had reminded Hikaru very much of that self-proclaimed *KingofGo*, more than it could have been explained by both of them coming from the same Korean school of Go. When Hikaru had asked Pak after the match, the young man admitted to having studied under Korea's premier Go player for the past two years. And that had shown in his style - Hikaru had rarely played such a tricky opponent.

But, while Hikaru's game against Pak had been great, Hikaru couldn't help but find it lacking when compared to the intensity of his game against Touya Kisei. Pak hadn't been able to build the aura Touya had exuded simply by being there; he hadn't even managed to match the pressure *seiji* had somehow projected across the Internet.

Looking back on those eight years after Sai's death, Hikaru had to realize that he wanted to play more such exciting games. And he didn't think he'd find them if he continued like he had before. At least, he hadn't in all that time. Maybe that was what the Hand of God was all about, striving for a higher purpose through pitting himself against the best of the best? After all, finding the one, perfect move was pretty much impossible if one didn't have an opponent whose skills demanded such a move.

He chuckled quietly. Less than a year ago, he had been convinced that he'd never show his Go offline, and now he was regretting that he couldn't play more pros. He really didn't know what he wanted, did he?

Well, he still had three years to decide; although, he didn't think it was much of a decision anymore. It almost seemed like fate was doing everything in its might to push him into the pro world; Ogata and Touya certainly were, each in their own unique manner.

But no matter which future he chose - it would be one where he could realize *his* Go. His need to play, his hunger for really good games, but also his love for teaching and sharing his knowledge. And in the end, that was all he needed to know.

Heh, maybe he had just discovered his inner Sai.

With a smile on his face, he let the roar of the jet engines lull him to sleep.

Hikaru nervously straightened the chairs of his very own noodle restaurant for the umpteenth time.

Ten minutes until the grand opening of Igo Ramen.

It had been a long and harrowing task to come this far. It had taken him nearly six months to get through all the bureaucratic red tape and those thrice-cursed health regulations to be allowed to open his

own ramen restaurant. Convincing the bank to give him a loan as start-up capital had been the least of all hassle, mostly because Akari had taken a few days off from her economics classes at Tokyo U and helped him with the paper work.

Akari wasn't there yet, but she had promised that she'd come by after classes finished for the day. Old man Mizuhara had also promised that he'd come over later that day, and so had both his mother and his grandfather.

Hah, Hikaru would bet his entire first month's income that his grandfather was going to demand the Go Special.

Hikaru had managed to keep it a secret, and he had also made Mizuhara-san swear not to tell his grandfather that Igo Ramen was all about Go. Well, the name kind of gave it away, but Hikaru counted on the surprise factor that nobody would expect a noodle restaurant to actually promote Go.

There was plenty of Go décor around. Hikaru had put all his love for the game into it. Old Man Mizuhara had tried to tell him that there was such a thing as too much, but Hikaru thought he hadn't crossed that line yet.

He had distributed several issues of Go Weekly amongst the tables, had place mats with pictures of Go stones on them, and he had even bought a small magnetic goban which sat on the cash register at the moment. Instead of pictures, he had framed famous kifu, amongst them the Ear-reddening Game Sai had played as Hon'inbou Shuusaku. Most of those games, Hikaru could recreate without needing to look at the paper.

As soon as he saved up enough money, he planned on buying a TV and several videotapes with footage of as many tournaments as he could get his hands on. That should be something to entertain his customers - unless he also had to buy very expensive licenses to be allowed to show them in public. Well, he'd have to ask Akari. She knew stuff like that; heck, she was even studying it at university.

And maybe he'd even buy a real goban. A foldable one, but a real-sized board instead of the tiny magnetic one he currently had for his customers. He'd have to see how much demand there was.

He looked around. It was about time to heat both the noodle water and the broth to a point just shy of boiling, to prepare for his first customers. He also checked on his supply of fresh ramen, having prepared about the same amount of servings as Old Man Mizuhara did every day.

Old Man Mizuhara sold about 200 bowls a day, but Hikaru doubted he'd make that much. After all, he was only one single person, whereas Mizuhara always had at least a cashier and a second cook working at the same time. Hikaru had done his calculations with an average of 70 bowls a day. He'd come out even if he sold more than 54, and 70 gave him a nice profit to save for emergencies and bigger purchases. (2)

Well, he'd have to see how well business went. He was hoping for quite a few customers from the Japanese Go Association as it was only two streets away. There also were plenty of office buildings around, so the lunch rush was going to be big. Mizuhara's shop was in a more residential neighborhood, so the Old Man made his money mainly in the evenings.

Hikaru was really looking forward to what kind of crowd was going to frequent his Igo Ramen. He had distributed lots of flyers in the surrounding area with the help of his mother, and he'd put a few announcements of Igo Ramen's grand opening in the local newspapers.

If everything went well, Hikaru was going to move in above the restaurant. He'd need to sell at least 69 bowls a day if he wanted to be able to afford renting a small apartment in the same building. At the moment, he was still commuting from home, which took him about 90 minutes each way. Old Man Mizuhara had laughed at him and had told him that that was what he got for quitting at his ramen stand.

He looked at the big clock mounted high on the wall opposite the counter. Five more minutes until the grand opening.

He briefly leafed through the tsumego he had prepared for the Go Special. It had been Sai's idea to use Go in that fashion, and Sai had helped him create his first few problems of his own.

Although it was almost nine months now, Sai's absence still hurt. But, strangely enough, setting up Igo Ramen had managed to soothe some of his pain. He was just continuing what Sai and he had started, and it was surprisingly liberating to be able to fondly remember the ghost instead of flinching every time he heard the word 'Go'.

seiji had played a big role in that healing process, too. This tsumego, for example, had been adapted from his second game against *seiji*, two months ago. After losing to *seiji* the first time, he had wanted to take revenge for *seiji* 's arrogant manner of talking down to him. But in their second game, *seiji* had defeated him just as effortlessly, and *seiji* had told him that the next time, Hikaru ought to place three stones.

The same three stones Hikaru had refused to place when playing Sai.

So, of course Hikaru wasn't going to place any stones whenever he met *seiji* again. And he'd prove once and for all that *seiji* wasn't as good a player as Sai had been.

Smiling slightly, Hikaru had to admit that he had ranted at his computer more than once when he had logged on and found out that *seiji* wasn't online yet again. Perhaps it was *seiji* 's skill; perhaps it was *seiji* 's elusiveness. Whatever it was - *seiji* had reawakened first Hikaru's interest in Go, and then his combative side. Not all amateurs were push-overs, and it was high time for *seiji* to realize that.

He was interrupted by the clock on the wall chiming eleven in the morning. Time to open Igo Ramen and start a new chapter in his life. He was his own boss now, and he'd show Old Man Mizuhara that he had no problems with managing his very own ramen restaurant. To think of it, Mizuhara had offered to buy him out when (when, not if!) Hikaru ran out of business. And the guys at Heart of Stone were betting on how long that would take. And although Akari had shown him how to do his own accounting a gazillion of times, she still thought he couldn't do it.

Argh, he hated it how everyone was underestimating him! He'd show them!

Freshly motivated with his self-pep-talk, he went to the door and turned the sign from 'Closed' to 'Open'. Then, he retreated once again behind his counter, excitedly watching alternately the clock and the door. Heh, the guys from Heart of Stone were going to be really surprised when they saw Igo Ramen. He wondered how many of them were going to show up today, but he was pretty sure that Kawai would force everyone to come - if Old Man Mizuhara didn't do so first. That man had a very loud organ that could convince the most reluctant guy, even if only through sheer volume.

The longer he had to wait for his very first customer, the more the effects of his pep-talk wore off.

Five minutes passed, then ten. He nervously shuffled his tsumego again, trying to see whether he had really judged their difficulties correctly. Then he had to lower the gas beneath his pot of miso broth because it was getting a bit too hot. Miso stock wasn't supposed to boil because that led to the separation of miso and fluid, and the stock lost its typical murky quality as the curdled soybean paste sank to the bottom.

The jingling of the wind chimes he had hung above the door startled him.

He looked up to see a middle-aged business man enter his restaurant and raise an eyebrow at all the Go décor.

Hikaru pasted a polite smile onto his face to hide how nervous he was serving his very first customer.

"Hello, welcome to Igo Ramen! How can I help you?"

(1): WAGC: It is very much unrealistic for Hikaru to be Japan's representative at the WAGC the following year already. I'm not sure how exactly the representative is chosen in Asian nations, but I assumed that it is done in a similar manner to the other countries. In the western world, the representatives are chosen by summing up the scores of important tournaments for five years running, and then the nation's player with the highest score gets to go to the WAGC. Since Hikaru has been amateur for only a year, he can't have gotten enough points to participate. Chalk that one up to artistic license.

(2) ramen bowl calculations: I looked up rents in Tokyo and estimated the production cost of a bowl of ramen, just to get a feel for whether a business like Hikaru's in such a central location was even feasible and how much he would have to sell approximately to be in the black. However, I didn't do a proper business calculation with purchase price, energy costs, loan interest, write-down, incidental expenses, business taxes, sales taxes, marketing costs, and whatever else one has to keep track of. So I might be completely off with my numbers, too.

A/N: Well, finally it is done. The story ends the same way as it began, and the two storylines finally meet up - in Igo Ramen. That probably was predictable, but I hope I at least made it interesting.

And, funny thing, just a few hours after I inserted Hikaru framing the Ear-reddening Game as wall-decoration for his newly opened Igo Ramen, I read the very same thing in esama's "My humble, unworthy

self". So, yes, it apparently is possible for two authors to come up with the very same idea independently, and no, I didn't copy esama.

I hope I didn't bore you too much with Hikaru's ramblings about the purpose of his Go. However, I think this is a very, very important step before maybe becoming pro. As a pro, Go isn't only recreation and fun, but also a way to earn a livelihood. Unless one's purpose is strong enough, Go will be reduced to a way to make money - and that is something Hikaru really wants to avoid. He needs to decide how strong his love for Go and whatever else Go is to him, how far that will support him. And, sorry, that takes a lot of soul-searching.

Yes, I know, it is very mean of me to leave the present storyline open like that, but then again, I have said everything that I thought important. Hikaru finally jumped beyond the shadow Sai's death had thrown across his life, and in doing so, he discovered that maybe he was more similar to Sai than he had thought. I included some pretty strong hints that he is eventually going to turn pro, but I wanted to leave the option that he might also stay an amateur. I really hate it how good Go players staying amateur never seems to be an option, even when it's an AU where the history and the power balances have been shifted completely. At least my Hikaru is going make a well-informed decision instead of just going along with the flow of things because he doesn't have anything better to do.

Sequel - no. Definitely not. I have thoroughly exhausted my Igo Ramen muses, and I can't really think of anything worthwhile to tell after this. As you might have realized, I am very bad at continuative writing, thus the present-past format that shows only the most important snippets of Hikaru's life. And I can't see any way I could set up a similar situation in Hikaru's future. Maybe, if you're very lucky, you'll get a one-shot, but don't hold your breath. I don't have any inspiration for that yet, so you might still be waiting in twenty years. However, if - *you* want to write a continuation / sequel / side story / one-shot, or just borrow Igo Ramen, feel free. Just drop me a PM so that I can read it too *g*.

Sakiku